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Why do BA Photography students persist in their studies at a small university? A case study

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Doctorate in Education
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Abstract

Relatively little research has been conducted into undergraduate student persistence in an art and design context: despite significant political interest in retention by the Higher Education sector. A greater understanding of students' decision-making processes can encourage institutional change as well as meeting stakeholders' political incentives. This study aims to identify the internal and external forces at play in the persistence of BA Photography students within a single art, design and media specialist institution. It seeks to explore the relationships between these forces, and to generate recommendations for institutional practices to encourage student success and persistence.

This study is 'insider' case study research, into the single unit of my own teaching area. However, I also position my study within larger social, psychological and institutional contexts. The temporal nature of the student life cycle and the possibility of reciprocal change, (at both internal psychological and external institutional levels), is explored using mixed methods, sequentially using both quantitative (e.g. surveys) and qualitative (e.g. interviews) methods of data collection in 'waves' and forms the 'sequential reflective chain or spiral' design recommended by Hartley and Chesworth (2000).

Findings indicate the internal dimensions of 'individual' student contexts to be the most important factor in the persistence process. Individual experiences such as age, prior qualification, and residential status as well as goals and values, interact with the wider institutional and local course milieu to influence persistence decisions. The research shows the extent and reasons for student persistence, despite potentially 'doubting', in particular the importance of 'people' within the persistence process, the increasing value that students place on the local course context, the importance of interest in the subject of study and a process of temporal alignment within the peer group as instrumental goals become more important as students progress through different Levels of study.

I discuss how the external sphere of institutions and courses of study are 'situated' within specific contexts and institutional frameworks, to identify which contexts might be indigenous to the art and design environment, and which are transferable to the wider HE sector. It is hoped that the recommendations that emerge from this study will help other institutions 'improve retention by design' (Johnston, 1997).

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1 Research Questions

This research is a situated case-study exploration of student persistence that is located within the boundaries of a single undergraduate course and institution. My primary research question is:

- **Why do BA Photography students persist in their studies?**

Secondary questions seek to contextualize this within interactions between individual students internal (sociological and psychological characteristics) and the external institutional environment, over three Levels of study. In identifying dimensions of these complex interplays, I aim to make recommendations to encourage undergraduate persistence within the wider Higher Education (HE) sector.

- **What forces are at work to encourage student persistence despite challenge?**
- **How do these forces interact to encourage persistence decisions?**
- **What are the implications for practice?**

The impetus for this research stems from two themes apparent in the literature. First, there is a focus on the challenges students face and reasons why students withdraw, rather than persist in spite of them. This has the potential to inspire blame and negativity for both institutions and students. My more positive focus on persistence positions this research as an exploration of the student experience rather than merely the final outcome of withdrawal. Second, the literature tacitly implies a degree of reciprocity between diversification and student retention:

‘Widening access must not lead to an increase in the number of people who fail to complete their courses.’

(David Blunkett in Select Committee for Education and Employment 2001, p.20)

There is a frequent focus on the experiences of ‘non-traditional’ students, who are positioned as different from ‘authentic’ students (Bowl, 2003). In my view, this risks encouraging a deficit model (and potentially institutional passivity to change), rather

than examining institutional practices themselves. I believe it is more productive to concentrate on enhancing the progression and achievement of *all* students. Tinto (2009b) also takes this position, recommending that HEI's:

'...move beyond the provision of add on services and establish those educational conditions on campus that promote the retention of *all*, not just some, students.'
(Tinto, 2009b, p.1)

Therefore, this research aims to understand both the internal and external factors that encourage persistence within my own teaching context of an undergraduate Photography course.

2 Research Rationale

This study is based on a view that persistence is situated within both institutional environments and individual student attributes. Haggis (2004) acknowledges:

‘People have individual experiences of learning which will vary according to contexts and situations.’

(Haggis, 2004, p.337)

I am particularly interested in forces that are within institutional control, reflecting my wish to make transferable recommendations to encourage persistence within the HE sector. This an important feature of my research, as Young et al (2007) propose that staff tend to focus on perceived deficiencies in students rather than aspects of institutional provision. I agree with their argument that:

‘Many of the factors offered by staff that locate the issues within individual students can be turned around to locate the issue within HE itself.’

(Young et al, 2007, p.285)

Although I have explored the role of internal student attributes, I wished to avoid a singular focus on ‘non-traditional’ identity. These students are often aggregated into a discourse of being ‘at risk’ of withdrawal (e.g. Yorke and Longden, 2004b). The National Audit Office (NAO) (Bourn, 2007) identifies these newcomers to HE as being students who are mature, first generation entrants, part time, from households with a low income, from ethnic minority groups, from socio-economic groups 4-7, as well as students with a disability and from low participation neighbourhoods on the basis of postcode (Bourn, 2007, p.54).

Young et al (2007) argue for ‘an emerging discourse of adaptation’, proposing that institutions should change rather than expect students to assimilate into the HE environment (Young et al, 2007, p.275-277). This research is similarly positioned, as I also believe:

‘It is not simply enough to open the doors: what goes on behind the doors has to change to accommodate new types of student intake.’

(Cotterell, 2001, p.6)

The literature frequently suggests that the ‘new types of student intake’ Cotterell refers to (i.e. ‘non-traditional’ students) face additional difficulties in this assimilation process. However, I agree with Christie et al’s (2004) critique of the idea

that these students are disadvantaged 'victims', as this ignores the coping strategies that all students use (Christie et al, 2004, p.620). They suggest that:

'...debates about student retention often emphasise rather simplistically the distinctive nature of the difficulties causing non-traditional students to withdraw.'
(Christie et al, 2004, p.618)

Whilst I do explore the influence of student characteristics (such as age and prior qualification), my research is not entirely framed by this. Christie et al (2004) recommend a more holistic approach to researching persistence therefore I also focus on institutional environments. Goldfinch and Hughes (2007) similarly recognise that persistence is not necessarily the result of individual entry characteristics alone, and the external institutional environment also plays a role:

'Opinions seem to differ on the extent to which differences in the characteristics of the students on entry form the most important factors in retention, compared to their experiences on or shortly after starting their courses.'
(Goldfinch and Hughes, 2007, p.260)

The subject area of art, design and media (ADM) differs from more traditional university settings. By nature, it is a more individual, subjective and practice based learning experience. There are also contextual differences (e.g. students' prior qualification profile) and environmental factors (e.g. the provision of a studio workspace) that should be considered. These may account for differences in student withdrawal patterns between ADM courses and the wider HE sector, (e.g. 'wrong course' is cited less often as a reason for withdrawal, Yorke, 2002a). These phenomena have been given relatively little attention in the literature to date, despite significant interest in student retention.

At 'case' level, my institution and the BA Photography course have excellent retention rates (demonstrated by **Figures 9-13 in Appendix A**). Published Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) statistics demonstrate there is wide variation within different subjects and between different institutions in the sector as a whole. However, they show that rival ADM institutions maintain similarly high retention rates to my own HEI. Therefore, this context offers a good opportunity for a study of persistence, both in relation to the specific course and in terms of the lessons that might be learned from ADM specialist institutions. The academic/vocational nature of photographic education at degree level also potentially maximises generalisation

of my findings to other subject areas that exist along a profession/non-profession based continuum (Leppel, 2001). Newbury (1997a) calls for further research in a photographic context in particular:

'Despite the social and cultural importance of photography in modern societies, photographic education is an area that has inspired very little in the way of academic research... the impoverished, or total lack of, understanding of photographic education is a significant omission.'
(Newbury, 1997a, p.421)

These factors are in some ways representative of the HE sector as a whole and in others unique, but transparent exploration of these is certainly of interest to a retention-orientated system. However, it should also be noted that though I attempt to encourage institutional change, this study could stand accused of primarily serving institutional interests by attempting to maximize student retention.

3 Literature Review

This chapter aims to examine the different ways that student persistence (and withdrawal) have been explored, and the different contexts/concepts which frame them. Christie et al (2004) point out two approaches that either construct withdrawal (and by implication, persistence) in terms of student characteristics, or target institutions for not adequately responding to increasing diversity of the student body (Christie et al, 2004, p.619). Young et al (2007) also call for this latter, institutional approach, (where this study is also positioned). However, despite noting a culture shift, their findings imply the reality may not support the rhetoric. Tutors often framed withdrawal as student-related, whilst students themselves were more likely to cite some aspect of institutional provision. Although discussing withdrawal (when students stop persisting) Christie et al (2004) suggest that studies (like this one) which investigate student/institution interactions are most valuable because:

‘Non-completion depends on a unique set of relationships between the student, their social circumstances and institutional practices.’
(Christie et al, 2004, p.620)

This underpinning conceptual approach is also taken by Haggis (2004):

‘...every person who learns [is] uniquely situated within a matrix of intersecting factors and dimensions of experience. These intersecting dimensions are neither solely internal nor solely external.’
(Haggis, 2004, p.339)

Therefore key themes that have shaped this research include: a multiplicity to the withdrawal process (e.g. Yorke and Longden, 2008); social and academic integration (e.g. Tinto, 1993); sociological and psychological approaches (e.g. Bean and Eaton, 2000); ideas of temporality and the course as a community of practice (e.g. Wenger, 1998, 2000).

These ideas raise yet more issues, including student transition (e.g. Johnston, 1997, 2002), academic preparedness (e.g. Lowe and Cook, 2003), cultural capital (e.g. Thomas, 2002), student expectations (e.g. Long and Tricker, 2004) as well as the nature of academic environments and subject areas themselves (e.g. Newbury, 1997a, 1997b; Leppel, 2001, 2005). However, I also view this existing research through the lens of my own insider experience as a photographic tutor, which is

potentially another addition to this study, given the current scarcity of literature regarding persistence in specific ADM environments.

3.1 What does 'persistence' mean?

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) benchmarks consider student retention in institutional/traditional terms (rather than from a student viewpoint). They define this as the completion of an undergraduate degree within three years. However, this varies in international educational contexts. For example, the Australian system takes a more student-centred view, in that student success is measured by 'success per study unit' rather than year based statistics (Yorke and Longden, 2004c, p.6). The American system is also more accommodating since transfer between institutions and attendance modes which include part-time and 'stop out' from study leads to student graduation patterns that exceed the four year expectations of the institution (Svail, 2011).

However, UK universities also use different definitions of persistence, also termed 'progression' or 'continuation' (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2008, p.10). For the purpose of this research I define persistence as the successful completion of Level 1 of undergraduate study and subsequent re-enrolment into Level 2 of the same course, at the same institution, in the following academic year. Institutionally, this definition differs from 'retention', as this also includes students who are repeating a Level of study but have not withdrawn, and students who 'intermit' (take a period of time out of studying), with the intention to return at a later date.

I extend my definition of persistence to include progression throughout the student life cycle (e.g. from Level 2 to Level 3). Johnston (1997) and the NAO (Bourn, 2007, p.54) also use these boundaries. Again, this excludes intermitting and transfer/direct entry students, who could be considered as persisting in HE generally (Yorke, 2008). These definitions could be criticized for a bias towards institutional interests, i.e. completion within three years. However, from a student perspective, the financial burden of extra years study is something most would aim to avoid, and transfer out of an HEI could point to some deficiency in institutional provision that might have been addressed.

3.2 Push/Pull: why do students withdraw from Higher Education?

Student withdrawal is not the focus of my research, but the reasons why students depart may constitute difficulties that all students' potentially experience and that persisting students somehow overcome. Christie et al (2004) critique the potential assumption that students who withdraw have had a distinctly different experience from those who remain on their courses. It would be an oversimplification to presume that persisting students had never encountered these issues (or opportunities). A UK national survey undertaken by Yorke and Longden (2008) proposed the most common reasons for student departure (in order of frequency) to involve:

- Poor quality learning experience
 - Not coping with academic demand
 - Wrong choice of field of study
 - Unhappiness with location and environment
 - Dissatisfied with institutional resourcing
 - Problems with finance and employment
 - Problems with social integration
- (Yorke and Longden, 2008, p.22)

A similar report by the NAO (Bourn, 2007) mirrors these reasons, although it includes additional factors such as 'personal reasons' (e.g. homesickness, illness) and 'to take up a more attractive opportunity' (e.g. career goals met without completion) (Bourn, 2007, p.23).

Mackie's (2001) conceptual framework offers a useful approach to utilising the plethora of student withdrawal research in an exploration of persistence, and a way of considering the nature of student 'doubting' (considering withdrawal) and subsequent persistence. She identifies four categories of factors that can 'enable' or 'constrain' students. These factors act as 'push' (encouraging withdrawal) or 'pull' (encouraging persistence) forces:

- **Social** (e.g. meeting people, integrating and participating in university life)
 - **Organisational** (e.g. coping with course content, supportive perceptions of the institution)
 - **External** (e.g. finance, accommodation, family)
 - **Individual** (e.g. motivation, commitment, home-sickness, goals)
- (Mackie, 2001, p.267-8)

When these act as 'constraints' (or 'push' forces), this framework reflects Yorke and Longden's (2008) suggestions as to why students withdraw. For persistence, however, the model acknowledges the importance of student fit, i.e.

feeling part of the social landscape of the institution, and being able to cope academically. This approach is similar to Tinto's (1993) model of integration into institutional social and academic spheres. Mackie concludes that ultimately, the level of commitment (within the Individual force) is the main difference between students who withdraw and those remain despite potentially 'doubting'. However, importantly, she does not neglect the external role of the HEI in mediating these decisions, paraphrasing Brower (1992, p.445):

'The dimension of individual differences is shown through students shaping their environment by choosing to pursue their own life tasks and goals, while their environment shapes them through its norms, expectations and opportunities.'
(Mackie, 2001, p.266)

There are clearly a number of intertwined internal and external factors at work acting as push/pull forces for individual students. Johnes and Taylor (1989) also take this approach, suggesting that variation in withdrawal between UK universities was related to academic preparedness of new students (derived from A-Level scores). This is an internal factor that is specific to individual students. They also identified the external institutional forces of the subject mix of the HEI and the provision of accommodation in Halls of Residence as playing a role in withdrawal. Although they also found that male students were more likely to withdraw than female students, they add this may have been a 'proxy' which masked factors such as subject mix (Johnes and Taylor, 1989, p.217). Chah and Burke (1999) similarly refer to interplay between internal and external factors. They propose that age, gender and the subject of study influenced the probability and time taken to complete. For example, they found that mature students often took longer to complete their courses, but noted that this pattern was not uniform over all ages of mature students nor was it the case in all subject areas (Chah and Burke, 1999, p.371).

Therefore existing research suggests both internal and external factors influence withdrawal/persistence, rather than merely the sociological characteristics that make up a non-traditional student identity. Christie et al (2004) also criticise studies that do not account for the progression of young traditional students, arguing that these individuals also experience challenges yet:

'It is often assumed that these students have a relatively unproblematic time at university.'

(Christie et al, 2004, p.630)

Yorke (1999) suggests that younger students often cite a lack of study skills as a reason to withdraw, whilst Cantwell et al (2001) found that persisting mature students actually performed better academically than their younger peers. Although mature students are deemed 'at risk' by HEFCE (2010), Johnston (1997) found studies at different institutions yielded different results regarding the affects of age on persistence, which implies external institutional forces at work. Roberts et al (2003) found that there was no difference between the sociological characteristics of 'doubters' and 'non-doubters'. Although there may have been differences amongst withdrawn students this was not the focus of the study. They go on to recommend:

'We should be cautious in assuming that non-traditional students will necessarily experience more problems in adjusting to HE. Many may possess other characteristics which facilitate persistence.'

(Roberts et al, 2003, p.8).

These studies suggest interactions between individuals and institutional environments act as 'push' and 'pull' forces. Focusing only on students' sociological/biographical features is not enough. This research therefore looks at the experience of students from a diverse range of backgrounds, and examines the impact of institutional practices both positive and negative.

3.3 Modifying Tinto's Student Interaction Model

Braxton (2000) acknowledges the almost paradigmatic status of Tinto's (1993) Student Interaction Model within the literature. This approach also positions persistence as successful interaction between (internal) individuals and (external) institutions, where students 'fit' (or integrate) into academic and social milieu. Tinto identifies thirteen interactions occurring over time. Students enter institutions with various biographical and psychological characteristics, (e.g. previous qualifications, goal commitments), that influence initial levels of commitment to the institution, and to the ultimate goal of graduation. These personal commitments, in turn, influence levels of integration into social and academic institutional spheres, which subsequently, over time, increase levels of institutional and goal commitment, thus leading to student persistence.

However, this is not without its critics. Braxton (2000) and Berger and Braxton (1998) suggest inductive theory revision of Tinto's model. The latter proposes that social integration is still under-defined, and that there is a lack of strong support for academic integration as a mediating variable in single institution studies. They also argue that the relationship between initial and subsequent commitment to the goal of college graduation has no logical connection to student entry characteristics, increasing institutional commitment and social integration (Berger and Braxton, 1998, p.104). They recommend future research should take the form of theory elaboration or theory integration, defining these as:

'Theory elaboration entails the application of new concepts borrowed from other theoretical perspectives to explain the focal phenomena, whereas theory integration involves the combination of two or more sets of propositions to form a larger set of interrelated principles...Theory integration is appropriate when two empirically supported theories explaining the same phenomena exist. In contrast, theory elaboration is sufficient when parts of the theory are incomplete. The application of concepts from other theoretical perspectives on the same phenomenon serve to fill in such voids in the focal theory.' (Berger and Braxton, 1999, p.104-105)

An example of a theoretically integrative approach would be that of Milem and Berger (1997) who investigated correlation between Astin's (1984) theory of involvement and Tinto's (1993) model of social and academic integration. However, my research is more analogous to theory elaboration. As it is located in a specific subject area (photography) in a single specialist ADM institution, there are contextual differences between my own research and the existing (American) literature that is mainly based on young students in residential and selective universities.

Yorke and Longden (2004c) outline contextual differences in HE provision in different countries. This is important to my research given that I draw on literature from the United States (and to a lesser extent, Australia). These differences in international contexts also justify my theory elaboration approach. Yorke and Longden (2004c) suggest that the USA and Europe have a strong tradition of what they term 'intermediate qualifications'. However, these vocational qualifications were less mainstreamed in the UK until the recent introduction of Foundation Degrees (Yorke and Longden, 2004c, p.4).

I will later discuss the nature of photographic education within the UK context (e.g. Newbury 1997a, 1997b), as views differ on the 'value' of a BA degree in photography as opposed to other more vocational routes into the photographic industry e.g. Higher National Diploma's. Additionally, much of the UK research I have drawn on in this study has been conducted with students on more profession-based courses such as Business (e.g. Mackie, 2001) and Nursing (e.g. Young et al, 2007).

Yorke and Longden (2004c) also note differences in educational policy making between different countries. This is particularly evident with regard to the social justice agenda and the common aim to diversify HE to include previously under-represented groups of students. Different countries focus on different groups of minority students and funding allocation mechanisms and the literature reflects this. Given my model of interaction between students and their environment, it is important to bear in mind that nature of the problems these students might face will vary in different higher education systems and contexts.

Similarly, given the large amount of research originating from the USA, it is important to bear in mind the diversity of HE provision and types of institution within that context, from large residential institutions to very small community colleges. This makes it difficult to generalise about the American HE system (Yorke and Longden, 2004c, p.15). Swail (2011) also argues that the American system is a more forgiving one than other international contexts. Whilst the financial burden on students is greater (which can limit college choice, but is not an issue in the UK), it is a system that is very difficult to fail in. There are more extended chances for student success and a more extensive range of 'choices' open to the undergraduate student through the modular system.

My research explores interactions between specific institutional contexts and student characteristics. Tinto (1993) argues that each university has its own characteristics that will shape the nature of student withdrawal, but goes on to remind us that we must be sensitive to a broad range of student experiences (Tinto, 1993, p.6). Using the contexts described in the literature from other nations may include issues and interactions that might be relatively overlooked using only UK based research (e.g. the experience of residential vs. commuter students, college choice and students' goals as they relate to choice of subject).

Braxton (2000) argues that there are four reliable interactions within Tinto's American theory that should be used as the foundation for any revision of his model. These are student entry characteristics and initial institutional commitment, social integration and subsequent institutional commitment (Braxton, 2000, p.258). He also suggests that 'economic, organizational, psychological and sociological perspectives' should be incorporated as 'helper theories' using both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate student withdrawal and social integration (Braxton 2000, p.258-259).

In short, he recommends a number of new directions to advance Tinto's model, or explore its validity in other institutional contexts:

- **Economic cost/benefit process** of persistence
- **Organizational structure** of the institution and course (e.g. size, staff-student ratios, Halls of Residence)
- **Psychological differences** between persisters and non-persisters and student attributes such as coping mechanisms and self-efficacy
- **Sociological** investigation of the role of reserves of cultural capital and the student peer group as a learning community
(Braxton, 2000, p.260-266)

He also recommends specific sites for future research, e.g. college choice and transition into institutional environments, experience of academic integration, and the role of 'at-risk' student characteristics (Braxton, 2000, p.266-267). These are points that I have taken into account within the specific context of a UK art, design and media specialist institution.

With these in mind, I will now continue to discuss the issues raised in the literature and further explore the role of internal and external forces. I will identify where these might be more widely applicable to students and institutions, as well as those perhaps more indigenous to an ADM environment. I prioritise students as individuals, but aim to investigate both sociological identity and psychological attributes in terms of their interaction with the environmental characteristics of the institution and course. An institution can change, whereas students' individual entry attributes cannot (Kinzie et al, 2008; Tinto, 2009a). I will therefore begin by examining the potential influence of forces operating at internal student level, before discussing the (adaptable) external institutional factors that might play a part in the persistence process.

3.4 Internal Forces: Sociological vs. Psychological approaches to student persistence

Whilst a research paradigm which looks to the experience of 'non-traditional' students may highlight inherent inequalities within the HE environment, focusing only on the retention of minority students could actually discourage institutions from adapting to new and different kinds of intake (Kuh and Love, 2000). Tierney (2000) sums up a convincing argument for an adaptational approach:

'Programs that see individuals as broken and in need of repair are less likely to create the conditions for success than those programs that assume students are valuable resources to themselves and their families, communities and society...The key word here is *respect*.' (Tierney, 2000, p.222)

HE can act as an 'intermediary agent', providing students with capital resources in the context of wider social equality and class mobility (Bourdieu in Berger, 2000, p.101). I have discussed how I position persistence as the result of an ongoing interaction between student and institution. Tinto's (1993) model of interaction, however, may tacitly (but unintentionally) promote the philosophy that universities do not have to change, as the model implies that students (not institutions) are expected to integrate and adapt into pre-existing educational structures (Kuh and Love, 2000). Exploring students' decisions through a sociological lens alone can also neglect the psychological domains of student persistence (e.g. motivation, goal orientation, subject interest and commitment) that have been found to influence persistence decisions (e.g. Pascarella and Terenzini, 1983; Mackie, 2001; Brower, 1992).

Roberts et al (2003) criticise purely sociological approaches. They argue that 'non-traditional' students may possess other attributes that encourage persistence (Roberts et al, 2003, p.8). These may take the form of psychological coping mechanisms or motivators, (e.g. Brower, 1992), familial support (e.g. Christie et al, 2004), life/time management skills (e.g. Cantwell et al, 2001, p.233) or personal attitudes and attributes such as being independently minded (Johnes and Taylor, 1989, p.217). There is no strong consensus within the literature that sociological characteristics have any uniform or causal relationship with subsequent persistence, though this is not to say that non-traditional students might not experience additional challenges.

In contrast to the sociological approaches of Bourdieu (1990) and Tinto (1993), psychological models (e.g. Bean and Eaton, 2000) focus more on cognitive processes and subsequent behaviour choices. These utilise psychological theories relating to attitude behaviour, coping behaviour, self-efficacy and locus of control (Bean and Eaton, 2000, p.50). Although Tinto's (1993) model does recognise individual entry characteristics, (family background, skills and abilities, prior schooling, intentions and goal commitment (Tinto, 2003, p.115), Tinto might reject the more extreme 'societal level' cultural capital approach advanced by Bourdieu (1990) for ignoring interactions and context at specific institutional level (Berger, 2000, p.108).

Attinasi (1989) and Tierney (2000) criticise Tinto's model as dependent on concepts used to explain different phenomena, namely Van Gennep's rites of passage and Durkheim's subsequent model of suicide. However, I argue that purely psychological models are equally guilty of a de-contextualised stance. Students' lived contexts do impact upon their experience, both positively and negatively. As there are often multiple and accumulative reasons for withdrawal (e.g. Hall, 2001, p.18) these cannot be contained within dichotomous sociological or psychological domains. The literature lies along a continuum of theoretical standpoints, from wide sociological approaches (e.g. Berger, 2000) based on Bourdieu's (1990) philosophy of capital and social reproduction, through the more institutionally contextualised student integration approach advanced by Tinto (1993), to the environmentally de-situated, highly individual, psychological framework used by Bean and Eaton (2000).

I suggest that internal psychological attributes such as motivation, self confidence and goal commitment are related to both sociological and economic frameworks, but that these also intersect with external forces. I will later discuss how internal/external interactions such as post-graduation goals and choice of subject might influence subsequent perceptions of cost/benefit and behaviour decisions (Leppel, 2001). For example, this might include the motivation to achieve certain types of goal, such as the reason for entering HE or attending a specific institution (Stage, 1989). Goal directed behaviour, motivation and persistence might also be mediated by students' perceptions of the relevance of learning (which

mirrors one of Tinto's (2009b) five conditions for student success) (Lizzio and Wilson, 2004, p.111-2).

Grove-White (2003) discusses photography undergraduates' ambiguous attitude towards theory/art history. She offers similar conclusions to Lizzio and Wilson (2004) in that students perceive essays as more immediately relevant to their course rather than their future career. How then might the course environment better meet students' instrumental or career related goals, impact on students' perceptions of benefit, and encourage persistence? Tinto (1993) discusses dual commitment to the goal of graduation (an instrumental motivation) and to the institution (an integrative motivation). Perhaps these factors operate in different ways at different times within the student lifecycle?

3.5 External Forces: Institutional contexts & the role of the course

Berger and Braxton (1998) propose students' perceptions of the 'organisational' qualities of their host institution might influence social integration. Their definition reflects the forces identified by Mackie (2001) and includes institutional size and selectivity. However, Yorke and Longden (2004a) also refer to students' perceptions of the HEI as caring about them. Zepke et al (2006) and Braxton and Hirschy (2004) similarly suggest that perception of the institutional climate is important for persistence (Zepke et al, 2006, p.587, p.589; Braxton and Hirschy, 2004, p.98-99).

It is evident that external institutional/course contexts need to be explicitly taken into account in terms of conceptualizing persistence as (successful) interaction between student and environment. However, the specific characteristics of institutions are not uniform. For example, Halpin (1990) based his study in a non-residential community college, finding that academic integration and interaction with faculty were important influences on student persistence. Social integration was less important for Halpin, which digresses from the Tinto model that is set in a residential institutional context. This suggests that students' residential status and the nature of the individual institution may influence the type and form of students' situated interactions and therefore persistence behaviour. Therefore these contextual features are considered in this research.

However, even within the same institutional context, different courses have varying levels of selectivity, curriculum design and subject philosophy. Whilst there is variation within the retention rates of different UK universities (Johnes and Taylor, 1989; Christie et al, 2004; HESA, 2010), there is also variation between courses within the same HEI. It appears that much of the UK research into student persistence has been conducted with Business and Computing students (Long and Tricker, 2004; Mackie, 2001; Roberts et al, 2003) or Nursing students (Young et al, 2007). Due to the nature of these subjects (consisting of clear professional employment pathways), these students may have different/more vocational goals, reflected in their choice of subject at the outset, than those who choose to study an art, design or media related subject. The ADM context could be considered as leaning towards the other, less immediately 'applied' end of a 'professional' subject spectrum. The courses offered at my HEI do not have such clearly articulated post graduation pathways, nor are the job opportunities so widespread, therefore studies such as this one can provide a useful addition to the literature.

Tinto (2009b) identifies five conditions for student success (and by implication, student persistence) that are under institutional control (unlike the entry characteristics or initial commitment of students). These are expectations, support, feedback, involvement and relevant learning (Tinto 2009b, p.2-5).

First, he proposes that institutions should have high and clear academic **expectations** of their students. I would expand this in that institutions should also ensure (through marketing and recruitment material) students have realistic expectations about their chosen institution and course. This responds to Yorke and Longden's (2008) findings that students may leave due to poor decision-making, and my own observations and experience of withdrawal interviews through my professional role. De Rome and Lewin (1984) also acknowledge that the interactions between students and their institutional environment begins prior to physical arrival on campus, arguing that the impact and quality of prior information and advice, from both schools and the host HEI, should be addressed. Long and Tricker (2004) comment that the relationship between students on-course experiences and their original expectations has not been adequately addressed within the literature, a point that has been taken into account in this study (Long and Tricker, 2004, p.1).

Second, Tinto points to the importance of academic and social **support**, particularly for those students who are insufficiently academically prepared (also discussed by Lowe and Cook (2003) and another feature of this research), and for minority students. However, Johnston, (1997) and Roberts et al (2003) found that students rarely cited institutional support services as a reason for persistence, which suggests that support is best situated at course level.

Feedback, particularly early feedback, is Tinto's third condition, including early warning systems such as learning skills assessment (which relates to pre-entry academic preparedness). However, Blair (2006) warns it is 'the manner in which this feedback is given [that] is critically important' (Blair, 2006, p.86). Brinkworth et al (2009) suggest that feedback is an important means by which new students feel 'supported, accustomed to and supported within the university environment' however, 'as student numbers increase there is a risk that this may not be prompt or 'early' due to increased tutor workloads. They propose that self-evaluation mechanisms are a way of alleviating this, and encouraging students to be more independent and autonomous self-evaluators (Brinkworth et al, 2009, p.169). Similarly, Cook and Leckey (1999) suggest that staff need to have an awareness of 'the diversity of background needs and aspirations of the students that they teach.' They cite McInnes et al's (1995) suggestion that 'information on students attitudes, experiences, beyond course and subject evaluation, should be routinely collected analysed and disseminated within each university' (Cook and Leckey, 1999, p.158).

Tinto (1988, 1993) positions the provision of feedback temporally, stating that 'student attrition has its own momentum...the longer one waits to intervene the more difficult it is to make a difference' (Tinto 2009b, p.3). This relates to his temporal model of student separation, transition and incorporation (Tinto, 1988). Elkins et al (2000) suggest that non-attendance might signify that a student is unable to separate from their home communities, an early predictor of non-engagement (Elkins et al, 2000, p.265). Recording attendance in class is one way of identifying potential disengagement with the academic environment (i.e. through students' continued absenteeism) so that timely institutional interventions can be made.

Tinto also recommends these early interventions should also aim to **involve** students in the academic and social communities of the institution. This hints to the

role of 'people' (i.e. peers, tutors and other staff) in the persistence process, and this was a key finding of my research. Halpin (1990) suggests that contact with academic staff should result in greater integration and persistence. Berger and Braxton (1998) position social integration as composed of peer and tutor relations though they propose that this relationship is not fully investigated within the literature (Berger and Braxton, 1998, p.107). Therefore this research aims to examine this relationship more explicitly.

Finally, student perception of the **relevance** of learning is important for Tinto.

He proposes:

'The more students find value in their learning, the more they see it as connected to their interests, the more likely they will become involved in the learning and in turn will learn more and persist more frequently.'
(Tinto, 2009b, p.4)

Relevance is an important consideration in an ADM context. This is particularly due to the individually led practice that is often the basis of these types of courses as well as students' post graduation, practice-based goals and commitments (Mackie (2001) proposes that commitment is a key feature of persistence).

My BA Photography course is 80% photographic practice and 20% theory. However, (also found by Newbury, 1997a), my students demonstrate strong subject interest. They talk about 'doing' photography and demonstrate a visual orientation, rather than using words (the approach encouraged by the theoretical component of the course). Therefore, this research has explored students' perceptions of the value/relevance of course content in relation to their (potentially changing) goals being met.

Grove White (2003) found that photographic students often made distinctions between theory and practice, (rather than integrating them as the course would aim for), and adopted different (deep or surface) learning approaches in relation to the goals they entered with. Perhaps prior qualifications also play a role in perceptions of relevance? Newbury (1997b) makes a distinction between the vocational nature of National Diploma (ND) qualification (a common entry route to my own course) and the more academic HE environment. It is my own observation that these ND students often have more difficulty/less engagement with the

theoretical elements of the curriculum. Newbury cites a comment made by the British Institute of Professional Photographers that highlights this academic/vocational 'divide' in relation to photographic employment pathways:

'There can be no justification for increasing the numbers recruited into colleges, except to match the undersupply of photographers to scientific, technical and medical sectors. Any educational training should equip people to be useful entrants . . . the fact that a degree course may equip people to think is a bonus.'
(Berry (1992) in Newbury, 1997b, p.110)

Therefore, how does prior qualification relate to student goal orientation and subsequent perceptions of relevance? Leppel (2001) would describe the National Diploma qualification, with less emphasis on theoretical ideas, as more 'profession-based' than the Foundation Diploma in Art and Design (another entry route to my course). Does this translate into different on-course experiences and 'best fit' with the course itself?

Therefore this research has investigated prior qualifications, goal commitment and student perception of on-course personal change. Whilst Yorke (2002) points out that 'wrong course' is a less common reason for withdrawal in art and design, it might be more useful to re-conceptualise this as 'wrong course ethos' rather than 'wrong subject' within a photographic context. Students may have a strong interest in the medium itself, as defined by practice, but at degree level they are also expected to engage with theoretical material that might be deemed irrelevant by more professionally/practically-orientated students. Those with strong photographic career related goals might subsequently withdraw or transfer to a more profession based (or vocational) photographic course.

Tinto's (2009b) five conditions (of expectations, support, feedback, involvement and relevant learning) constitute a model that again implies an interaction of students' individual attributes and the course/institution. Of interest to this study is the emphasis placed on the external course environment as supportive and relevant to individual students perceived (and changing) goals and needs over time.

3.6 Interactions: Temporality & contextually 'situated' individuals as both social product & psychological entity

I have discussed broad internal (student related) and external (institutionally related) forces that may impact upon persistence decisions. However, these spheres are almost impossible to separate. Tinto's (1988, 1993) temporal model of integration positions these interactions longitudinally, proposing a three-stage process. First, students must **separate** from their home community in order to experience a period of adjustment and **transition** to be **incorporated** into what could be read as mainly pre-existing and static institutional social and academic spheres (though he later refines his view to take greater account of the role of the classroom and educational practices which support persistence (e.g. Tinto 2009a, 2009b).

From a sociological perspective Berger (2000) proposes that:

'Students who successfully integrate from a social reproduction perspective do not do so at the expense of their home backgrounds but because of them.'
(Berger, 2000, p.109)

This implies that the university environment is part of some students' existing culture. Essentially, he is arguing that traditional students, by the nature of their social background (or as I will discuss, as a result of prior educational experiences) possess the skills and attitudes that are expected in HE and therefore there is congruence between student and environment and successful transition so 'best fit' is more easily achieved. Young et al (2007) sum up the idea:

'When the students cultural capital is valued and fits with the institution they are 'fish in water'; when cultural practices are deemed inappropriate, incongruent, deficient or invalidated, students' are more likely to experience accumulative stress and consider dropping out.'
(Young et al, 2007, p.276)

However, although accounting for a temporal (or 'accumulative') student experience, again this implies that institutions cannot (or do not) change. My research reflects Brower's (1992) view that:

'The process of integration is not one of finding a 'fit' between the person and the environment, which implies matching 'static' student characteristics to 'static' environmental characteristics.'
(Brower, 1992, p.445)

Integration can take place at different levels. Wenger (2000) discusses local and global participation in communities, implying a sense of belonging that operates

in different (but co-existing) forms. These are transferable to my research context at the external levels of the course ('engagement'), of the wider institution ('imagination) and of the commonalities and 'rituals' involved in being an HE student across the levels of course, institution and sector ('alignment'). Wenger's model also acknowledges the personal agency of individual community members as well as the potential for a community to evolve:

'The concept of alignment as used here does not connote a one-way process of submitting to external authority, but a mutual process of co-ordinating perspectives, interpretations and actions so they realize higher goals.'
(Wenger, 2000, p.162)

Jawitz (2009) acknowledges the role of individual lived histories and personal contexts in influencing the shape of new academic staff participation in communities of practice. He recognises a matrix of intersecting internal and external factors, but one that again, is positioned longitudinally:

'Each individuals experience will be unique due to the inevitable negotiation between the workplaces norms and practices and the individuals subjectivities and identities.'
(Jawitz, 2009, p.243)

Longden (2001) and Elkins et al (2000) found that the reasons for withdrawal varied at different times in the academic calendar and it is reasonable to assume that the reasons for persistence may be equally shifting in nature. This relates to both Wenger's (2000) concept of forms of trajectory that for some students would involve disengagement with the institutional community at an identifiable point (inbound, peripheral and outbound trajectories), and Tinto's (1988) transition model that included separation, transition and incorporation points.

I feel this approach is justified, as through my own teaching role I perceive that students change as they progress through Levels of study. For this reason, I position undergraduate photographic education as temporally similar to a community of practice (Wenger, 1998; 2000) that potentially includes an increasing sense of self-identity within the (photographic) community as students move towards full participation. Wenger (2002) offers a useful definition of these 'communities', and these characteristics mirror peer group relations in my photographic learning context:

'Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis.... As they spend time together, they typically share

information, insight, and advice. They help each other solve problems. They discuss their situations, their aspirations, and their needs. They ponder common issues, explore ideas, and act as sounding boards. They may create tools, standards, generic designs, manuals, and other documents—or they may simply develop a tacit understanding that they share.’ (Wenger et al, 2002, p. 4)

Thomas et al (2001) are similarly interested the social characteristics of knowledge management work organisations:

‘...knowledge work is not a solitary occupation, nor is it sufficient to say that knowledge work involves many people. Rather, in case after case, it becomes clear that knowledge work involves communication among loosely structured networks and communities of people, and that understanding it involves identifying the social practices and relationships that are operative in a particular context.’ (Thomas et al, 2001, p.866)

For the purposes of this study, I would conceptualise the ‘context’ that these social practices operate at as the immediate (photographic) peer group. Lesser and Stork (2002) examine communities of practice in a business context, proposing that the community acted as a safe environment where individuals could share challenges (Lesser and Storck, 2002, p.838). Therefore students’ perceptions of their relationships with the peer group and of personal ‘change’ have been investigated as part of this study. However, this might operate quite differently for individual students in terms of their personal circumstances, such as age, residential status, prior educational experiences, as well as their goals, aspirations and motivations.

Therefore my longitudinal approach attempts to explicitly account for two aspects of the student experience. First, the potential for individuals to gain capital reserves, confidence and coping strategies over time and experience as well as through continued interaction with institutional environments. Second, although a social reproduction model acknowledges the potential for tutor/environmental privilege/disadvantage to doubly advantage students with higher levels of cultural capital (e.g. Berger, 2000; Orr, 2004), it does not explicitly acknowledge the role that positive pedagogic practices (e.g. feedback) may play in students’ psychological development, change and disposition to persist. Nor, as Cantwell et al (2001) suggest, does it account for the potential for peer group/institutional community norms to change, as a result of increased participation from previously under-represented types of student.

Dörnyei (1994) (in the context of language learning) also discusses interactions between external academic forces and internal individual forces in the

persistence process. He identifies the different levels of learner (or 'individual') and context though 'language' (or 'subject'), 'learning situation' (or 'curriculum', 'tutor' and 'peer') (Dörnyei, 1994, p.277-281). This approach is appropriate to my research and its photographic context. I frame the 'subject' as the nature of photography itself, a democratic socio-cultural phenomenon, and 'individual' in terms of student characteristics and their interaction with course and institution at different levels.

By implication, both Tinto (1993) and Berger (2000), construct students as responding (e.g. psychologically, Bean and Eaton, 2000, p.56) to an unchanging and socially reproducing (Berger, 2000) institutional entity, as opposed to one that is malleable. Surely, true interactions within the community of students and staff who inhabit institutions, who work together to define the 'competencies' described by Wenger (2000), will change institutions. This is particularly relevant to the subject area of photography with its quickly shifting parameters (e.g. the onset of the digital age) and with a socio-cultural reach that expands beyond the institutional ivory tower. Newbury (1997a) reflects:

'Photography has seeped into almost every aspect of modern existence. It is valued as an artistic medium and artefact, as well as being intimately bound up with the rituals and practices of everyday life.'
(Newbury, 1997a, p.421)

Therefore, drawing on both Braxton (2000) and Tinto (1993), I view the individual student as co-inhabiting various internal and external contexts that are impossible to separate. These are temporally positioned and malleable rather than static. Similarly, by borrowing from 'helper theories' (Braxton, 2000, p.260-266) I seek to understand student persistence behaviours both within my own course/subject area (photography) and the broader institutional organisational contexts (Braxton, 2000, p.259).

I will now discuss these interactions in more depth, including the role of the organisational nature of the institutional environment as it relates to the access individual students have (or not) to the institutional community as a result of their residential status, whether as commuter or local students or living in Halls of Residence. I then explore the potential role of the peer group as a learning community, as well as the means by which students' possess/gain capital and this role in the persistence process. However, I will argue that new students' reserves of

capital are not just class based, but also come from previous forms of educational experience (or preparedness. This again suggests a temporality to the persistence process, as recognized by Tinto (1993), and that's is also a feature of the community of practice model. Finally, I will examine the economic framework of students' ongoing cost/benefit decisions as they face challenges (e.g. Leppel, 2001). This relates to Mackie's (2001) concepts of push and pull forces and students' personal goals (e.g. Stage, 1989; Brower, 1992).

As a study located within a single course and institution, helper theories can be utilized across different internal/external sites, as themes that run through this research. Johnes and Taylor (1989) conclude that inter-institutional comparisons of non-completion rates are less useful due to the differences in both institutional contexts and student populations. As a small single institution/course study, it is therefore possible for example to explore the experience of students from different backgrounds. This may be on the basis of the (internal) 'at-risk' characteristics discussed in the literature (e.g. mature students) or on the basis of other experiences such as prior qualification or residential status.

These internal characteristics may relate to psychological attributes such as goal commitment, self-confidence and motivation that may change over time, through continued interactions (both positive and negative) with the organisational attributes of the institution and course. Therefore, the first site of these interactions I will discuss is the role of living on campus in Halls of Residence as a primary vehicle for social and academic engagement. For residential students, does this encourage persistence by providing immediate access to the broad institutional community? If so, how might the experience (and attributes) of commuter students differ?

3.6a Halls of Residence as a site of Level 1 interactions

Tinto's model of social integration (conducted in American, residential institutional contexts) was unsupported in Halpin's (1990) and Pascarella and Chapman's (1980) (also American) research that was based in commuter colleges. Students in these institutional contexts did not live in Halls of Residence, nor would they necessarily physically 'separate' from their home environments. Halpin

suggested that academic integration, rather than social integration, and interaction with faculty were more important themes for persistence. He states:

'Person-environment fit models of retention may not be applicable to the community college setting...These students may be thoroughly integrated into communities that have nothing to do with their roles as college students. Contrast this experience with that of an individual who leaves home and community to live in a residence hall and study on a new and unfamiliar environment. Clearly the personal need to seek and create 'community' is greater in the latter case, nearly non-existent in the former.'
(Halpin, 1990, p.30)

Although the temporal nature of Tinto's (1993) model of student transition reflects Wenger's (2000) discussion of 'inbound' trajectories within communities, in a residential context it does not explicitly account for the more 'peripheral' trajectories that commuter students might experience:

'Trajectories can be of various types. Inbound trajectories invite members into full membership in a community. Peripheral trajectories allow a person to interact with the community without making a commitment to becoming a full member.'
(Wenger, 2000, p.175)

Johnes and Taylor (1989) also conclude that accommodation provision is one of the factors that might explain variation in institutional retention rates. However, they also add a significant psychological dimension to this, and allude to a matrix of push/pull factors that individual students might experience as a result of their living arrangements:

'Students who live at home may be less likely to leave prematurely than those who have to live in rented accommodation because they may not have to face the same financial burdens. On the other hand, students who move away from home when they go to university may be more independently minded and have a greater chance of surviving a university course.'
(Johnes and Taylor, 1989, p.217)

Draper (2005) (like Brower, 1992 and Mackie, 2001) also counters Tinto (1993), by explicitly giving priority to psychological attributes and the potential for students to be supported by individuals outside the institution. Some students' home communities may be more important to them than the social landscape offered by the institution. Rendon et al (2000) offer further challenge to Tinto's 'separation' concept, highlighting the potential for dual socialisation of minority students (Rendon et al, 2000, p. 135-138). In my research context these ideas are relevant to explore with locally domiciled and commuter students due to their potential proximity to the home environment.

Rendon et al (2000) re-conceptualise 'separation' as 'healthy individualisation' as relationships are gradually modified over time (Rendon et al, 2000, p.135). This acknowledges again the temporal nature of the student lifecycle and mirrors Wenger's (2000) discussion of multi membership within different communities with fluid boundaries that students can 'belong' to in different ways (e.g. Wenger, 2000, p.162, p.167).

The home community can also act as an emotional resource and mediating factor, which also challenges Tinto's idea of 'separation'. Family (as well as peer normative values) can exert social pressure to persist as 'subjective norms' (Meier and Albrecht, 2003). This is particularly important in my own institutional context, with increasing levels of local/commuter students who maintain geographical proximity to their home communities. Further study of this demographic is important for examining persistence and it is of interest to the HE sector as a whole since the introduction of top up fees, and the national recession, may encourage more students to avoid the financial burden of studying away from home. Therefore Level 1 residential status is an important consideration of this research to examine how accommodation provision on campus might encourage interactions, integration and persistence. These are points which could be transferable to other institutional contexts in terms of the potentially different ways in which commuter students might navigate their experience both socially and academically to mediate the less close contact with the HEI.

3.6b Institutional, interactive communities

Whilst residential students maintain proximity to the student community at wide institutional level, it is possible that commuter students only engage with the community of their immediate peer group, as a social element of their academic experience. Modularity is a particular feature of the American and of more traditional UK HEI undergraduate curricular structure, yet it is uncommon in art and design. Therefore the outcomes of this research as situated in a non-modular curricular programme may be of interest to more 'traditional' institutions, in terms of lessons that may be learned from art and design course structures, and the

proximity of the peer group in a whole-cohort (often studio based) learning environment (which might mediate the social experience of commuter students).

Individual students (particularly in my own teaching and research context) are situated within a single Level cohort and are subject to the same learning experiences. This differs from the American/traditional UK undergraduate modular structure. The art and design peer community is more cohesive as all students in a Level of study engage with the same learning experiences as opposed to the broad modular choices offered in American/traditional institutions. From a psychological perspective, Dörnyei (1994) proposes that student peers form a community who possess group-specific motivational components in the form of shared goals, norm and reward systems (Dörnyei, 1994, p.278). However, Elton (1996) notes that the role of collective motivation (within the peer group) is still relatively ignored in the literature.

However, these communities are not static. Kuh and Love (2000) refer to the collective habitus of educational institutions, acknowledging that:

'...culture is constantly evolving, albeit imperceptibly, shaped by interactions between old and new members and contact between other organisations and cultures.'
(Kuh and Love, 2000, p.198)

This position, as also noted by Brower (1992) and Wenger (2000), acknowledges a reciprocal relationship between people and environment, whether at the level of the institution or the course. My research also draws from Lesser and Storck's (2002) proposition that communities of practice (i.e. the peer group) can encourage the development of social capital within its members:

'...we suggest thinking of a community as an engine for the development of social capital. We argue that the social capital resident in communities of practice leads to behavioral changes, which in turn positively influence business performance...These dimensions include connections among practitioners who may or may not be co-located, relationships that build a sense of trust and mutual obligation, and a common language and context that can be shared by community members.'
(Lesser and Storck, 2002, p.831)

Wenger (2000) identifies three elements that combine to define the 'competence' of a community, again best conceptualized at course level in my research context. These are fluid rather than static. We 'define [them] with each other' and 'determine [them] with [our] colleagues as [we] interact day after day'. This community competency involves students' understanding of a 'joint enterprise'

(i.e. a shared understanding of the nature of the community, a contribution to this and a sense of accountability towards it). There is also a sense of 'mutuality' (that through interaction members establish norms which are mutually understood) and a 'shared repertoire' (the ability to appropriately access communal resources such as language, routines, sensibilities, styles) (Wenger, 2000, p.163-164).

These ideas are also reflected in Lesser and Storck's (2002) study. They draw on Nahapiet and Ghoshal's framework of social capital as:

'The sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit.'
(Nahapiet and Ghoshal in Lesser and Storck, 2002, p.833)

They continue to define social capital as consisting of three dimensions, which somewhat mirrors Wenger's (2000) discussion of community 'competency'. This is a useful framework to apply to peer relations in a learning context. First, a **structural** dimension means that there must be a series of connections between individuals (students) and this includes self-perception of being part of that network. Second, a **relational** dimension means that a sense of mutual trust must be developed within these communities. Finally, a **cognitive** dimension refers to the common understanding and/or interest that the community shares (Lesser and Storck, 2002, p.833).

I also consider the tutor alongside the peer group as part of this course specific community and this relationship would also include these structural, relational and cognitive dimensions. As Lave and Wenger suggest, in a practice-based photographic course, the 'master' becomes an equal as the student progresses (Lave and Wenger, 1991a). In their study of apprenticeship as a learning model, they situate learning as an inherently social phenomenon:

'People usually think of apprenticeship as a relationship between a student and a master, but studies of apprenticeship reveal a more complex set of social relationships through which learning takes place mostly with journeymen and more advanced apprentices. The term community of practice was coined to refer to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice.'
(Wenger, 2006)

Indeed, Tinto (2009a, 2009b, 2009c) later developed his original (1993) view to encompass the role of the institution/course itself in creating such communities:

'The key concept is that of educational community and the capacity of institutions to establish educational communities that actively involve students with other members of the

institution, in particular with other students in those places where students are asked to learn.'

(Tinto 2009b, p.4)

Thomas et al (2001) also recognise the importance of this social dimension of knowledge management organisations:

'Most of the phenomena that have been identified as important - relationships, awareness, common ground, incentives, and motivation—are network or social phenomena.'

(Thomas et al, 2001, p.867)

Abouserie (1995) proposes that interactions between students and their learning environment (at course level) improves students' self-esteem and learning, and by implication, their dispositions towards persistence (Abouserie, 1995).

Meanwhile, Meier and Albrecht (2001) acknowledge situational variables in mediating goal directed behaviour as a process of goal decision, implementation and evaluation. Therefore, the peer community may be vital in promoting persistence, though this might not only relate to residential status but also to students' personal psychological attributes.

For example, Sommer and Baumeister (2002) found that when students with high self-esteem perceived rejection, it increased their motivation to succeed, whilst when those with low self-esteem perceived rejection they tended towards learned helplessness. This suggests that successful integration into the course community may be less important in the persistence process of students with high self-esteem while the absence of feelings of inclusion might act as a push force for students with low self-esteem.

How might psychological attributes, such as these, influence persistence when they interact with additional variables and personal characteristics? Halpin (1990) found that American commuter students, as opposed to residential students, particularly valued integration into the course community though contact with faculty. Therefore, how important is high self-esteem for commuter students? Do less academically integrated commuter students with low-self esteem face a double challenge? What is the role of the tutor as 'master'? Dörnyei (1994) identifies the tutor as a motivational component, in terms of tutor/student relationship increasing students (albeit extrinsic) affiliative drive (Dörnyei, 1994 p.278-279). Do courses within the same institution differ in this respect?

Tinto (2009b) and Blair (2006) suggest that feedback is important for persistence. However, perhaps this operates differently for students from different prior qualification pathways? Kluger and De Nisi (1996) suggest that there is a self-factor related to feedback, in that students' perceptions of themselves (possibly influenced by prior experiences of interpretation or understanding) can 'block learning' (Kluger and De Nisi, 1996, p.266).

Lave and Wenger (2001) propose that self-identity and motivation are generated as newcomers (i.e. Level 1 students) move towards full participation (Lave and Wenger, 2001, p.111), suggesting a temporal student experience. Is the same true for students' capital reserves, which might imply that students from certain educational backgrounds (e.g. Foundation Diploma) are more adept at receiving constructive/negative feedback than others (e.g. A-Level)? Age is another dimension of this, in that A-Level students are younger. Is personal maturity an additional variable that should be considered? These questions again suggest the impossibility of separating internal personal attributes/experiences and external contexts.

With the role of these institutional communities in mind, in the art and design context, how does provision of studio workspaces relate to persistence, perhaps as the 'home-base' recommended by Wenger (2000)? Yorke and Longden (2007) argue that the more time students spend on campus the greater their engagement will be (Yorke and Longden, 2007, p.31). Similarly, the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFE), (2000) suggest that peer group proximity (encouraged by studio provision) encourages integration. This implies that this institutional commitment (in Tinto's (1993) terms) might be more easily achieved in the studio environment, which in turn promotes student persistence.

'The more students need to be on campus mixing with their peer group the stronger their affinity with the institution is likely to be.'
(NATFHE, 2000, p.7)

Whilst Tinto (2009a) suggests, in the American modular context, that students' co-registration in classes might provide the learning community that could encourage persistence, a peer group/whole cohort curricular design is already common in ADM contexts (Tinto, 2009a, p.2-3; 2009b, p.4). This relates to Lave and

Wenger's (2001, p.112) acknowledgement of peer relations and the circulation of knowledge. Can peer proximity encourage higher cohort morale and/or normative motivational values (Dörnyei, 1994)? Does the importance of this vary for students with different biographical (e.g. residential status, prior qualification) and psychological (e.g. self-esteem, self-image) characteristics?

Tinto (2009a) identifies three components of learning communities, namely shared knowledge, shared knowing and shared responsibility. These are somewhat analogous to the elements of community 'competencies' (joint enterprise, mutuality and shared repertoire) outlined by Wenger (2000), as I have previously discussed. All of these features are common to the BA Photography curricular structure in my own research context (Tinto, 2009a, p.2-5). My study therefore addresses students' perceptions of the importance of the peer group, tutor and pedagogic practices at course level in mediating their persistence decisions.

3.6c The role of capital in the persistence process; student, institution & course

Students' possession of capital is another key feature of the literature. As discussed above this may not only relate to class, but to academic preparedness (and potentially, an associated feeling of 'belonging'). Perhaps Further Education (FE) study in the discipline might also encourage this. Through advanced study, students might feel less peripheral to a community of photographic practitioners. To use Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of legitimate peripheral participation, perhaps students who have undertaken FE qualifications have acquired more capital and are further along a journey to full participation in the socio-cultural practices of a (photographic) community. They propose:

'For newcomers, the purpose is not to learn *from* talk as a substitute for legitimate peripheral participation; it is to learn *to* talk as a key to legitimate peripheral participation'. (Lave and Wenger, 1991a, p108-9)

Berger (2000) discusses students' access to economic capital (money) and cultural capital (interpersonal skills, educational background, habits, preferences) as commodities used in the social reproduction process (Berger, 2000, p.97-98).

'Individuals with access to the most capital resources, in various combinations, constitute the upper class, and they use their resources to maintain and/or expand their capital resources and class standing...Careful manipulation of existing capital resources allows individuals to increase their position and status in society through the accumulation of greater sums of capital.'

(Berger, 2000, p.98)

Thomas et al (2003) propose that lack of capital reserves makes it harder for non-traditional students to assimilate and integrate into institutional academic and social spheres. However, this does not account for potential environmental change and variations between courses, even within the same institution. Nor does it acknowledge the possibility that individuals can gain capital over time (and through participation (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991) or that reserves of capital (e.g. educational capital gained through prior academic experiences) may buffer students from challenge and therefore encourage persistence. It also ignores personal attributes/goals (e.g. motivation, a sense of belonging and connection to the institution, status attainment through valuing institutional/course reputation) that considers the students as 'active agents', rather than 'passive recipients' of experiences (Stage and Hossler, 2000, p.172).

McDonough (1997) argues, from a social reproduction position, that social class and personal-beliefs about 'entitlement' influence engagement in HE generally and institutional choice (McDonough (1997) in Berger, 2000, p.100). Combined with Tinto's (1993) theories of goal and institutional commitment, the early persistence of students from different sociological backgrounds may differ slightly. Both Christie et al (2004) and Mackie (2001) suggest commitment to HE can overcome the difficulties that non-traditional students might face (Christie et al, 2004, p.620, 624). This may involve affiliation/interest with the subject studied, the value placed on the subject, the perception of the institution/course attended (e.g. reputation), and the strength and value placed on the goal of graduation (e.g. active or passive reasons for entering HE).

My research therefore initially contrasted the perceptions of students entering different courses, representing specific course environments within a more generic institutional one. These external environments are not homogenous, either by course, institution or subject area and I will now attempt to delineate between the ADM sector and more 'mainstream' HE subjects, and discuss how issues such as prior educational experiences and the learning and teaching context in art and

design, might impact upon internal issues such as students personal accumulation of capital and psychological coping mechanisms.

3.6d Academic preparedness in art & design

Art and design subjects generally differ from mainstream HE. As a subject area they are distinct from subjects that possess more explicit post graduation employment pathways such as engineering or medicine. However, within ADM, photography spans academic/vocational divides and it therefore seems reasonable to assume that it is a subject that is open to a variety of individual student goals and motivators (e.g. from an instrumental, explicitly career orientation to a more integrative motivation inspired by subject interest). As I have mentioned previously, Yorke (2002) notes that 'wrong course' (i.e. subject) choice as a reason for withdrawal in ADM is below average in comparison to the rest of the HE sector. This is of interest for this research as it may relate to students' intellectual academic preparedness and levels of educational capital provided by previous educational experiences, as well as the congruence between such experiences and HE study.

Most art and design undergraduates complete a Further Education (FE) Foundation Diploma (more non-profession based) or National Diploma (more profession based) prior to HE study. This also means that these entrants are also slightly older than the sector norm (i.e. A-Level entrants). Additionally, these FE students may have lived away from home before, and previously experienced the 'separation-transition-incorporation' stages that Tinto (1988) discusses. They also have more extended and deeper academic experience (and knowledge) within the subject area.

'Young' entrants, direct from A-Level study, are a minority (but growing) demographic in my own teaching and research context. HEFCE (2010) class mature students (i.e. over 21 at age of entry) as 'at risk' of withdrawal, as they are an under-represented/'non-traditional' demographic.

If we consider the BA Photography cohort as a community with its own 'competencies' (e.g. certain kinds of capital, the ability to work autonomously and the expectation of HE for entrants to be able to do this), A-level students are disadvantaged due to their youth and lack of academic experience within the

discipline. Therefore both age and prior qualification are of interest to me and these have been an explicit feature of my sampling strategy.

Yorke and Longden (2007) found greater proportions of mature students (i.e. over 21 at entry) within art and design (Yorke and Longden, 2007, p.7) and that these students had more positive perceptions of the learning and teaching environment. In my own research context, do younger students have similar perceptions, and how does this relate to degrees of educational capital on entry and subsequent persistence? Does this suggest the importance of more advanced life skills (e.g. time management) that Cantwell et al (2001) found that mature students hold? However, as I discussed previously, student identities are multi-layered, and whilst being an A-Level and young student might constitute a multiple disadvantage (or minority demographic) within an art and design cohort, mature students in my own context are also often both local and commuter students. This raises yet more questions about differences in students' experiences and motivations to persist.

Tynan (2006) discusses the class-based, tiered system of traditional (non-vocational) BA and (vocational) Foundation degrees. This is similar to the divide that Newbury (1997b) notes between National Diploma and HE photographic study. Does the BA system therefore doubly advantage students (of any social background) who come from particular educational backgrounds (i.e. in my own experience, those from Foundation Diplomas)? Can pre-entry qualifications increase students' reserves of capital? Is this also temporal within HE itself, accumulating throughout the Level 1 experience (e.g. Lowe and Cook, 2003; Longden, 2004)? Berger (2002) states:

'The earlier one begins to accumulate capital in various forms, and the earlier one is able to begin optimising those same resources, the greater advantage one will have later in the educational process.'
(Berger, 2000, p.102)

Christie et al (2004, p.627) acknowledge that the HE admissions system can rush students into making subject choices early which presumably carries higher risk of subsequently making the 'wrong choice' of course (Yorke and Longden, 2008). They also note that applicants may not have necessarily visited the university campus prior to enrolment, a form of engagement that might well encourage the institutional commitment that Tinto (1993) cites as important for persistence. It also

potentially provides applicants with more realistic expectations of institutional life, which Parmar (2004) suggests is a characteristic of persisting students.

De Rome and Lewin (1984) also propose that persisters are more likely to have made an early decision and have secured a place on their first choice of course and institution. Undoubtedly this more likely should the student have undertaken advanced FE study in the subject area. They predicted that students' usage of pre-enrolment information would be related to subsequent persistence, as would motivation and commitment. This is linked to a study by Powell (1979) who suggested that poor motivation and withdrawal may be linked to ill advised or insufficiently considered enrolment decisions. These factors might again suggest there are differences in the experience of students from different prior qualifications in that the more considered the subject choice is the more subsequently motivated the student.

However, perhaps these 'pull' forces would be more common in more traditional subjects/institutions. Often students' apply/are accepted only on the basis of A-Level grades/qualification points and Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) application forms. The art and design admissions system has a different application process. Students have commonly undertaken a FE qualification (rather than just A-Levels) in a related area to their chosen degree subject. This means that they potentially have more realistic expectations of what study will entail through earlier engagement with the subject material and additional time prior to entry (within the subject area) to make their choices. Additionally, as practice based courses, students are assessed on the quality of their visual portfolio (rather than A-Level grades alone). This also means that applicants must visit the institution to attend an interview. Although the practice of interviewing is not exclusive to ADM subjects, it means applicants experience the campus and course climate and engage with tutors prior to entry. As a result of the accumulation of these contextual variables ADM subjects (as a 'case') appear to be more likely to support persistence. Applicants are capable of making a more informed choice of subject and institution and subsequently 'best fit' should be more easily achieved.

This is another example of students' individual experiences interacting with course and institutional environments to influence persistence decisions. My study

will investigate enrolled students' perceptions of the subject/course/institution as realistic (or not). It will explore students' reasons why this was (or was not) the case, and how this subsequently impacted on their persistence decisions. Again, these results may facilitate recommendations being made to other institutions (and particularly non-ADM subject areas) as to how admissions and pre-entry processes may be modified to enhance persistence.

The literature discusses academic preparedness from an intellectual perspective (e.g. Allen, 1999; Lowe and Cook, 2003). There is little discussion on how these prior educational experiences may impact on the psychological inner dimension. For example, McKenzie and Schweitzer concluded that academic performance in Level 1 is linked with previous academic performance, potentially enhancing academic integration with the institution and personal self-efficacy beliefs (McKenzie and Schweitzer in Tight, 2003, p.95). Parmar (2004) and Mackie (2001) also suggest persisters have more realistic expectations of university life in general. Since art and design entrants often have more advanced qualifications and are subsequently older this might not only relate to previous experience of subject area chosen but also to subsequent levels of confidence or motivation as well as the psychological ability to cope with uncertainty and change.

Persistence may therefore be underpinned by attitudes about the nature of the self that may be potentially learned or encouraged through previous educational experiences (Dörnyei, 1994, p.276-7; Overwalle, 1989). In particular, these might include beliefs concerning the extent in which personal attributes like intelligence are fixed which relates to persistence in terms of the subsequent mediating effects on the adoption of types of goal (Dweck, 1999; Yorke and Knight, 2004). Dweck (1999) makes the distinction between entity (fixed) and incremental (adaptable) beliefs about qualities such as intelligence. Students with fixed self-theories adopt performance goals, whilst those with adaptable beliefs will adopt learning development goals (Yorke and Knight, 2001). This has implications for the way students cope with the challenges they experience on a course. Lack of success could be internalised by the 'fixed' student, perhaps judging in advance whether they can succeed at a particular task or not as a feature of self-efficacy (Yorke and Knight, 2001, p.27; Santiago and Einarson, 1998). Meanwhile the 'adaptable' student may

see failure or negative feedback as less of a personal or individual challenge, and as an opportunity for further learning.

Therefore 'at risk' characteristics are not merely endemic to particular sociological student demographics (i.e. non-traditional), but also relate to individual psychological attributes. Although these may, in turn, relate to students' prior experiences (such as pre-entry qualification) they might also be part of the make-up of any student. These attributes may work to buffer 'non traditional' students (as suggested by Christie et al, 2004), another reason that the notion of being 'at risk' due to sociological identity alone is not enough to understand persistence. For example, in terms of the resources of capital available to the student, surely adaptable (albeit non-traditional, 'at risk') students are more psychologically cushioned, and more likely to persist in a virtuous spiral, gaining capital along the way, if they are open to risk and potential failure? If students who are adaptable are more likely to persist in the face of challenge, how can courses support or encourage such a view?

These psychological characteristics represent students' attitudes to the extent to which they can individually take control of their own learning experience, and have the personal self-confidence and autonomy to be able to do so. Unlike the school (A-Level) system, HE study requires these attributes and they may be even more valuable in an art and design context. Blair (2006) points out the subjective nature of [design] education and particularly feedback in the group critique:

'Teachers and students give opinions based on experience and tacit knowledge, but as there is no one definitive or right solution, these opinions are in the main, subjective. Design students are expected to self-navigate through this 'sea of opinion.'
(Blair, 2006, p.84)

My study therefore also investigates students' responses and attitudes towards subjective tutor feedback and personal autonomy within their own photographic practice. Does (psychological) acceptance of this (as an uncertainty) protect (or even attract) students who value such non-didactic practices? Is this even more important given the inherently subjective nature of art and design practice? Manzella (1957) applies this idea to photography in particular:

'Even within our culture a photograph does not always convey the same meaning because each person who views a photograph brings to it somewhat different experiences.'
(Manzella, 1957, p.16)

Similarly, how does the external force of prior qualifications or on-course experiences play a role in these internal perceptions? Robins and Pals (2004) believe that these self-beliefs do not change as the student progresses through HE. However it is my belief, through my experience as a tutor, that the learning and teaching environment can influence or mediate them. This is another temporal construct that exists through interactions between students and their environment. Additionally, the assessment criteria of most art and design subjects (including photography) are unlike those in many other subject areas. Continuous assessment (and feedback) includes the process of making practical artefacts as well as the quality of the final product outcome (e.g. a body of photographic work). This suggests that the ongoing critical feedback students receive on their making processes is a feature of the ADM educational environment that is worthy of further investigation.

Abouserie (1995) recommends that enhancing students' self-esteem can develop and change self and environmental perceptions leading to improvements in academic performance (Abouserie, 1995, p.24). This is explored in my study through the evaluation of the process of supportive and developmental student feedback and its impact on persistence. Santiago and Einarson (1998) found that academic self-confidence and self-efficacy were related to students' self-perception of academic preparedness (again relating to prior qualifications) and expectations of tutor interactions in particular.

Similarly, Yorke and Knight (2004) continue that the self-beliefs of the tutor as fixed or adaptable may be projected onto the student. This highlights the significance of the course community and a link between the learning and teaching environment and the potential for temporal development of students' reserves of capital and psychological traits through interaction with the institution. However, this is perhaps an example of social reproduction as Blair (2000) found:

'There was evidence in the study that many teachers continue to teach and run crits mirroring the same practice and tradition used when they themselves were taught.'
(Reid, 2000, in Blair, 2006, p.91)

In addition, Young et al's (2007) research suggested that some members of staff perceived themselves as gatekeepers to the profession (nursing was the focus of their study) and that student withdrawal appeared to be constructed almost as a

process of natural selection. Therefore this may be an important factor in subject areas that are more 'profession' based. In a photographic context Newbury (1997b) cites McCabe (1991), arguing that photographic courses (and tutors) have their own discourse of what 'kind' of photographs are appropriate and valued.

'Students who want to take photographs in an artistic or even journalistic sense are being ostracized, not by their fellow students, but by the teachers, the very ones who should be encouraging them to express themselves freely.... Why shouldn't they be allowed to make 'beautiful' pictures if they want to?'
(McCabe, 1991, in Newbury, 1997b, p.115)

Surely this again constitutes a form of capital in its own right (again hinting to the potential importance of congruence in ethos of prior education and the HE photographic undergraduate course). Blair (2006) found that students in critiques commented on a specific 'language' or 'vocabulary'. She cites Percy (2003):

'Students who successfully engage with the performance of the crit. become a member of the fraternity, but those who cannot find a way of participating become isolated and alienated from the discourse.'
(Percy, 2003, in Blair, 2006, p.88)

Therefore, the nature of course subjects vary in terms of inherent discourses and levels of subjectivity. In photographic education there are clearly wide variations in course/qualification ideologies and philosophies, which may (or may not), be in tandem with students' goals, or capacity to manage these uncertainties. Perhaps this stems from the very nature of photography itself, as a 'lived' medium with different levels of socio-cultural status and use. Therefore some preliminary discussion of the nature of photography is required.

3.6e The nature of photography & profession vs. non-profession based courses of study

The choice of actual subject within a discipline (i.e. Photography within ADM) and its relationship with students' diverse and individual goals, both academic and personal, is important. This raises the question of the nature of photography itself not only as spanning vocational/academic divides, but also as a culturally ubiquitous medium that is potentially uniquely open to meeting students' diverse goals. These may be career related and/or relate to an inherent interest in the subject itself (Boltanski and Chamboredon, 1965). Manzella (1957) defines photography as:

'... the folk art of our century. It is the single creative medium commanding almost universal enthusiasm of persons of all ages and walks of life.'

(Manzella, 1957, p.15)

As one of the most prolific visual forms, Sontag (1977) re-iterates this point. We are surrounded by an 'image world', bombarded through commercial advertising and newspapers images clamouring for our attention and through the democratic and widespread construction of ourselves through the family album. Everyone has experienced a camera. This leaves the medium uniquely open to prior experiences and understanding, beyond formal educational experiences, in both students and their families.

However, there are also varying levels of cultural value placed upon these different uses to which photography is put. The gallery system and photographs taken for the art market are afforded the most cultural prestige and those images taken as mementos probably given the least. Photography has long struggled to be seen as an art form, and perhaps this is further translated into these ideological divides within photographic education. Its mechanical nature raises questions of man or machine. Students do not necessarily need to have the personal artistic (e.g. drawing) skills required in other art and design subjects and this may influence their choice of subject within HE. However, the range of cultural uses to which the medium is put and individual students' aspirations perhaps raises specific issues for photographic courses. In particular this includes managing students' expectations in terms of specific course ethos and philosophy.

Leppel (2001) acknowledges course variations in her exploration of persisting students. She orientates this by subject area, and specifically explores 'profession' orientated courses (e.g. business, health, engineering, education). This again hints at an academic/vocational divide that Newbury (1997a) examines in a photographic context. However, Leppel neglects the theory/practice divide that also exists within ADM courses I discussed previously, and within the qualifications that students may complete prior to enrolment in HE. It also excludes the differences (in course philosophy) between photographic degrees at different institutions.

However, the 'profession based' potential of certain subjects/courses is a useful addition to a study of persistence, in that it may also relate to career related goals that students enter with. These goals may, or may not, become more

important over time as the student nears graduation. This again suggests an interaction between individual students' aspirations and the choice of subject/course of study.

In my own institutional context, subjects/courses such as Photography, Broadcasting and Journalism would exist more towards Leppel's 'profession orientated' end of the continuum (i.e. the nature of the subject implies more definable post graduation employment pathways). Courses such as English, Film Studies or Fine Art would exist more towards the non-profession orientated end of the spectrum. With this in mind, it was therefore important to investigate where new students might perceive Photography to sit in this continuum, by investigating different students' motivations for enrolling in certain subjects/courses at my institution.

The undergraduate study of photography potentially spans both of these academic and vocational spheres, which enhances the transferability of results to other subject areas. From an economic perspective (an approach advised by Braxton, 2000), how are students' perceptions of future costs and benefits related to their goals (which may change over time)? This cost-analysis model also mirrors Mackie's (2001) push/pull forces. Leppel (2001) suggests this involves:

- **Individual goal commitment** (e.g. on vocational courses)
 - **Subject interest** (e.g. on non-vocational courses)
 - **Social** (support or socio-cultural acceptance by home community)
 - **Self image** (in relation to the subject)
- (Leppel, 2001)

Tinto (2009b) proposes that students are very likely to respond to any shortcomings (push factors) they perceive in quality and relevance. However, I would argue that this cost/benefit decision extends to include the experience of the institution as a whole (e.g. institutional (rural) location, Halls of Residence). Therefore, firstly, what are students' reasons for attending HE (generally) and how does personal interest and career goals link to their choice of photography as a subject area? These issues are particularly pertinent to research within photographic education, given the relationship between theory and practice that is given prominence in HE study (Grove White, 2003) as well as my students' strong demonstration of subject interest.

Do students enter with an explicit awareness of practical (economic) gains as a form of instrumental goal commitment? Stage (1989) investigated students' reasons for entering HE. He categorised his participants in terms of motive, (rather than demographic background), and found the most frequent reasons were:

- **Certification (getting a degree/job)**
- **Cognitive (knowledge for its own sake)**
- **Community Service (helping others)**

Other categories of Change, Escape, Social and Recommendation were less common (Stage, 1989, p.390) suggesting students are both interested in their chosen subject and are aware of future career related benefits. However, is there tension between students' career goals and the nature of HE study? How important is employability and the more professional elements of the curriculum in terms of perceived relevance (and persistence)? As a more 'profession based' medium, do photography students enter HE for its own sake, for interest, or for future gain and recognition? What are the perceived benefits of this route, given that there are other (Higher National Diploma, or less common today, apprentice) pathways into the photographic industry?

The student may persist as a result of goal commitment and/or subject interest in terms of reason for entering HE in general and their choice of subject specialism. However, Leppel (2001) warns that if students have chosen a vocational ('profession based') course only on the basis of future career related benefits they may find the subject matter uninteresting. Therefore these variables could work in opposing ways (Leppel, 2001, p.330). Tinto (2009b) takes a similar view:

'For too many students courses are simply hurdles to overcome in their pursuit of a college degree and the hoped for economic benefits that are presumed to follow.'
(Tinto, 2009b, p. 5)

From a psychological perspective, Abouserie (1995) cites Entwistle's (1988) view that these motives are also a determinant of subsequent approaches to study, and thus on course academic success. He argues that intrinsic cognitive interest is linked to a deep (process) approach to study and that fear of failure is related to a surface, reproducing approach. In a photographic context, Grove White (2003) similarly found that those who showed a cognitive interest in theory took a deep approach to learning, whilst those who were more interested in their photographic

practice (thus neglecting theory) took a more surface approach to this material. However, Schmeck (1988) argues that a student's level of self-esteem is more important (in Abouserie, 1995, p.20) in terms of their approach and response to challenge.

From a sociological perspective, do more 'profession based' courses (like Photography) attract more students from non-traditional backgrounds? Do students cite career (rather than subject interest) goals as a form of accumulating economic capital in the form of enhanced career opportunities? From a psychological position, how does this in turn relate to individual students' motivations and perceptions of relevance (of tasks and curricular focus), particularly in terms of an economic model of cost analysis (e.g. Braxton, 2000, p.260)?

Financial problems are also commonly cited as a factor in withdrawal, although these could be viewed as a variable in persistence over time due to students' ongoing and increasing financial commitment. Ramist (1981) and Christie et al (2004) both found that students receiving financial aid were no more likely to persist than those who did not. This suggests that it is inappropriate to judge persistence in terms of socio-economic status alone (Ramist, 1981 in Allen, 1999). Callender (2003) proposes that debt aversion is more likely to be a significant factor in the decision whether to attend university in the first place, a form of economic cost analysis prior to entry (Callender in Christie et al, 2004, p.628-9). Possibly, the media attention given to the introduction of top-up fees has resulted in greater awareness of financial commitments prior to entry. Also, individual students' abilities (practical intelligence) to manage money may be important for persistence, alongside a realistic attitude towards debt, and the commitment and benefit belief that the degree is 'worth it'.

Therefore, my research investigates students' (positive and negative) perceptions (as push/pull forces) of institutional environments in the context of both their reasons for attending the institution, and the potential role that these may subsequently play in encouraging persistence. As courses themselves exist along a profession/non-profession based continuum, how does subject choice relate to students' instrumental career related goals and perceptions of relevance in learning? Given the cultural status and myriad of uses of photography itself, how does this

relate to academic/vocational divides within HE and the need to address issues of employability in a photographic curricular context?

3.7 Conclusions drawn from the Literature Review

I have discussed how contextually specific issues suggest that there are both individual and institutional forces at play in terms of why students persist, some of which may be quite particular to the ADM/photographic context. This is an important gap to address in the current research field, especially as it also appears that withdrawal patterns within this specialism differ from more traditional subjects. This suggests that institutions need to pay heed to their marketing, admission and pre-entry practices, as ADM also has slightly different application and entry procedures as well as learning and teaching practices. Therefore, if the impact of these distinctions on the student experience and persistence can be unpicked and clarified, there is the potential to generalize across subject boundaries and for non-art and design institutions and courses to learn from these.

My reading suggests that interactions between specific (but intertwined) general institution-wide and course levels and individual psychological and sociological/biographical attributes have been relatively neglected in the literature, particularly in previous UK research. This research fills a gap, particularly in relation to an ADM institutional context. Therefore, the development of my underpinning framework at a primary level explicitly acknowledges these interactions, where they may occur between students' internal individual characteristics and external institutional environments.

Figure 1 shows this framework visually, represented as overlapping internal and external 'spheres' of influence on the student experience. It demonstrates the student (internal) and institutional (external) characteristics that might influence persistence decisions. However, as I have discussed within the Literature Review, the significance of each of these four spheres might operate at greater or lesser degrees of importance for different students.

The visual model was derived from the literature I have discussed and formed an initial framework for subsequent content analysis of research participants' responses. It firstly aimed to help locate the student experience and differentiate

between (internal) student related levels and the (external) contexts that are within institutional control. It was initially conceived as a modification of Mackie's (2001) Social, Organisational, External and Individual forces. However I felt that her framework did not lend itself to exploring situated *interactions* between students and their environments. Nor did it fully differentiate where these might occur at course and institutional levels (Mackie, 2001, p.267-8).

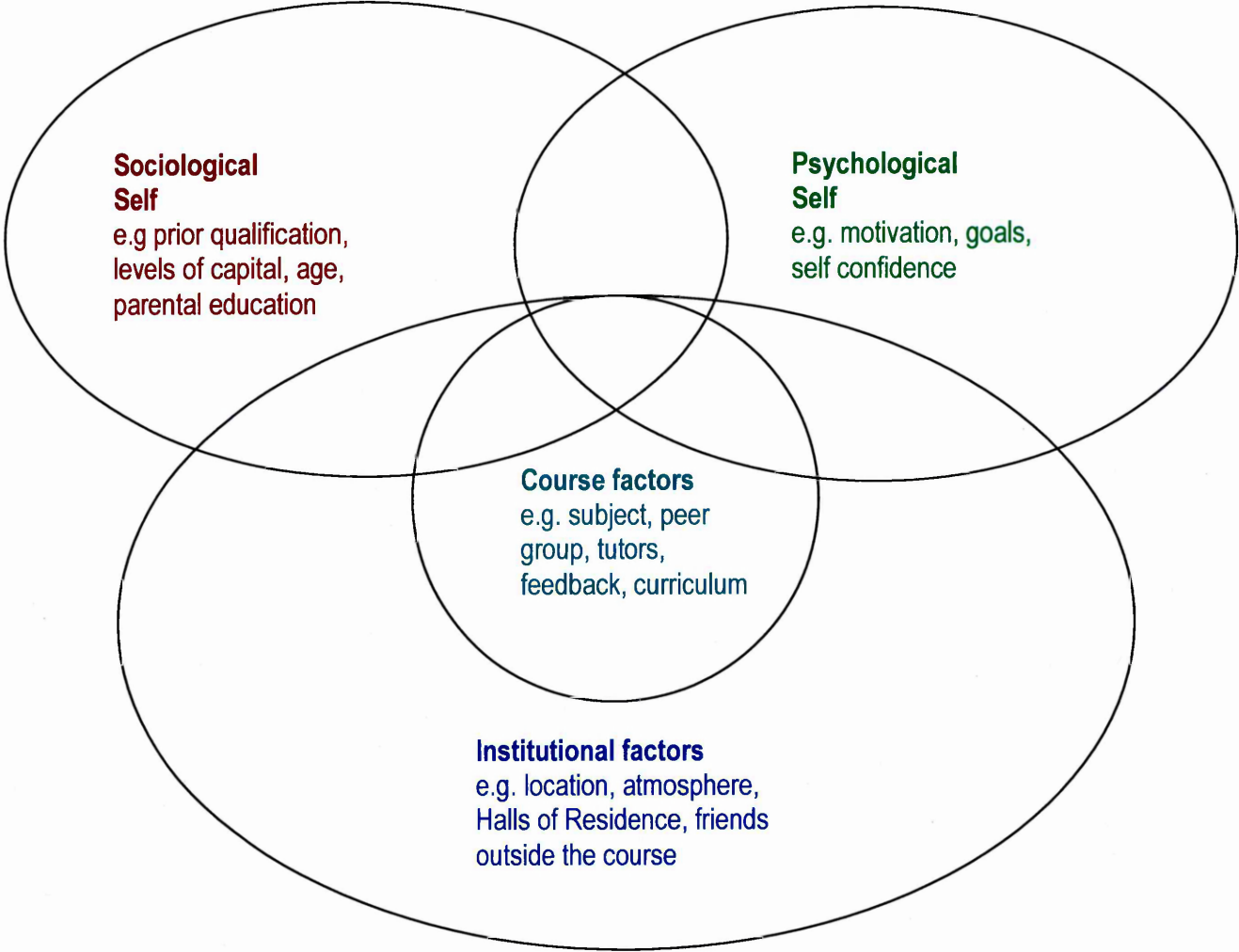
However, her concept of 'push' and 'pull' forces was a useful one in order to explore the different decision-making processes of different students (an economic framework advised by Braxton, 2000, and utilised by Leppel, 2001). My model looks to push and pull forces in relation to the internal spheres of students' lived biographical contexts (**Sociological**), as well as their inner personal characteristics and goals etc (**Psychological**). This was developed in response to Mackie's findings that the most important force for persistence lay within the 'Individual' student force. It also looks to integrate different approaches within the literature, as an attempt to overcome the dichotomy between the sociological (e.g. Tinto, 1993) and psychological (e.g. Bean and Eaton, 2000) (e.g. as discussed by Yorke and Longden, 2004b).

However, as a model of internal and external interactions, I also wished to look to student related push/pull forces as they overlapped with distinct **Course** and **Institutional** environments. These are environments that are within our control to change, so in terms of my aim to make recommendations for practice, it was important to be able to identify positive and negative aspects of institutional provision and how these might help or hinder individual students. Additionally, Martinez (1997) and Johnston (2002) propose that the specific factors associated at local institutional level (and within this, at course level) are likely to result from the unique characteristics and culture of individual institutions (as well as academic courses and subject areas) (Martinez, 1977; Johnston, 2002). Given the specific nature of the ADM learning environment (discussed in the Literature Review) it was important to me to be able to identify these interactions at different course specific and more generic institutional levels to be able to make generalisations for practice.

I hope that the descriptive nature of the case study will allow different HEI's to recognise some similarities institutionally (e.g. size, rural location,

accommodation provision), or in terms of academic subjects and departments (profession based, curriculum, structure, class size and demographic). It may also encourage and inform investigation of the impact of student identities (such as the 'at risk' characteristics outlined in the literature and used by HEFCE (2010) in their institutional funding allocations) within these 'lived' and local educational contexts. Therefore this research may inform targeted practices to alleviate the challenges that may act as 'push' factors for particular students, and identify the factors that act as 'pull' forces for students as both sociological selves and psychological entities.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework of factors that interact to encourage persistence



As I have discussed, the literature is relatively focused on internal student attributes, with less attention paid to complex interactions with specific institutional and course contexts such as the role (and responsibility) of the institution in terms of managing positive student experiences. However, I acknowledge that Tinto (e.g. 2009a; 2009b) now incorporates institutional change into his recommendations and explicitly calls for recognition of the role of the institution:

'Institutions [should] recognise that the roots of student attrition lie not only in their students and the situations they face, but also in the very character of the educational settings in which they ask their students to learn, namely the classrooms, laboratories and studios of the campus.'

(Tinto 2009b, p.1)

4 Methodology & Methods

4.1 Research Design

This case study enquiry investigates student persistence within the institutional boundary of a single undergraduate course. My primary focus is:

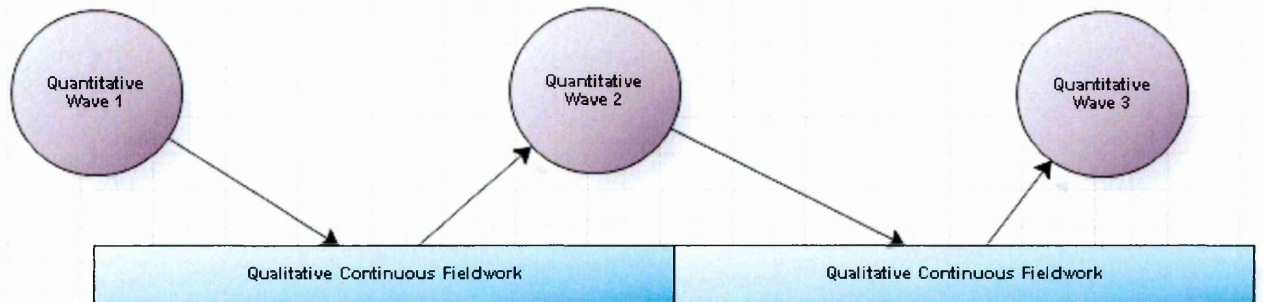
- **Why do B.A. Photography Students persist in their studies?**

However, given that my conceptual framework is organized around a model that ‘situates’ interactions between individual student’s internal characteristics and external institutional environments, my study also aims to identify the most important dimensions of these interplays. It aims to be able to identify and disseminate practices within institutional control that might encourage persistence. Therefore, my secondary research questions seek to explore:

- **What forces are at work to encourage student persistence despite challenge?**
- **How do these forces interact to encourage persistence decisions?**
- **What are the implications for practice?**

My research design is multi strategy, sequentially using both quantitative (e.g. surveys) and qualitative (e.g. interviews) methods of data collection in ‘waves’, (Figure 2), and forms the ‘sequential reflective chain or spiral’ design recommended by Hartley and Chesworth (2000). In Morgan’s (1998) terms, these waves of quantitative (QUAN) methods of data collection were sequenced as preliminary and complementary to principal qualitative (QUAL) study. A detailed data implementation sequence is shown in Table 1.

Figure 2 Model of research design showing 'waves' of qualitative & quantitative data collection (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.41)



As discussed in my Research Rationale, my motivation for this research is to promote institutional change and to make practical recommendations with a view to improving all students' experiences (Gitlin et al, 1989, p.203; Kemmis, 1988; Bloor, 2004; Stenhouse, 1975). However, Siraj-Blatchford (1995) argues that this approach is not unproblematic:

'...many of those researching social issues and motivated by the desire to facilitate change are faced with an apparent contradiction between a commitment to producing objective, value free research and their commitment to equality and justice.'
(Siraj-Blatchford, 1995, p.205)

For example, one source of criticism might include accusations of bias and the favouring of false results through my own personal 'political or practical' commitments (Hammersley and Gomm, 1997, p.3). However, others argue that all researchers have some bias and embody personal values and interests (Kemmis, 1988, p.183; Cook, 2001) and that 'those who declare they have no prior assumptions will walk them in on their boots' (Richards in Bazeley, 2007, p.23). Therefore I have aimed to make my own personal egalitarian commitments transparent. My orientation towards improved practice (to encourage student success and improve the student experience) is somewhat similar to the action research model discussed by Griffiths and Davies (1993):

'Action research is not trying to identify large-scale causal laws. Instead it focuses on the rigorous examination of a single situation, using knowledge drawn from experience and

research findings to illuminate it, in order to improve it. ...The purpose is always to improve practice, rather than to find the truths, universal or particular.'
(Griffiths and Davies, 1993)

My conceptual framework defines both 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students as both psychological inner beings as well as the sociological products that are a predominant feature of the literature. Siraj-Blatchford (1995) goes on to re-iterate the view proposed by Roberts et al (2003) and Christie et al (2004) discussed in the Literature Review, that a remedial model and a concentration on students' (non-traditional) identities within HE is insufficient:

'Much of the analysis of established research relevant to social justice issues has been inadequate and concerned with deficit perspectives, such as those emphasising intelligence and cultural deprivation.'
(Siraj-Blatchford, 1995, p.207)

Examining students' perceptions of their experience of various levels of the institutional environment provides a situated context from which areas of good practice can hopefully be identified and change encouraged, i.e. the 'adaptational' approach recommended by Young et al (2007).

4.1a A case study approach to explore student persistence

The case study approach is defined by Yin (2003) as:

'...[Investigating] a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.'
(Yin, 2003, p.13)

I aim to explore the factors that promote the 'phenomenon' of student persistence, within the real life situation of my own teaching context, a selective BA Photography course in a small, rural, specialist art, design and media institution. The literature suggests that the push/pull factors associated with persistence/withdrawal decisions include the individual features of students' internal sociological history and psychological contexts. These interact with one another and with different features of the external institutional environment, all of which make up the 'real life' context Yin describes. His definition of case study research is also appropriate to this study as its in-depth nature encourages rich contextual description and transparency. This is important given the complexity of these interactions in exploring 'why' students persist (e.g. Yin, 2003, p.7). Similarly, the smaller nature of the single case invites equally deep investigation of this proposition of 'interaction' as discussed in the

Literature Review. For example, whilst allowing incorporation of elements of the Tinto (1993) model of academic and social integration, it is also possible (given the small scale) to incorporate elements of rival/helper approaches into the research design (e.g. Brower's (1990) concept of 'life task' goals and Leppel's (2001) proposition of students economic decisions based on cost/benefit).

The choice of my specific institution/course as a 'case' is appropriate to a study of persistence. My institutional progression rate compares well to rival art, design and media (ADM) institutions and more 'traditional' universities (HESA, 2010). Similarly, at course level BA Photography also has an excellent progression rate (**Appendix A**). Whilst my institution has much in common with other contexts of specialist ADM institutions (e.g. application processes, students prior qualifications, learning and teaching methods), these deviate from more traditional HEIs. This is valuable and of interest in terms of exploring and disseminating lessons that may be learned from these types of institution. Stake (1995) proposes that selection of unusual 'cases' can help identify factors that may be overlooked in more typical ones (Stake, 1995, p.4). Both the specialist nature of the institution where my research was carried out, and BA Photography itself, demonstrate unusual characteristics in comparison to the wider HE sector.

Although the environmental factors associated with persistence at local level may be linked to more unrepresentative characteristics, other institutional features (e.g. size, rural location, provision of on-campus accommodation) might be transferable to other HEIs. This provides both typicality and a-typicality to the research context in terms of advancing existing knowledge about the nature of student persistence and the potential to generate improved practice. Yin (2003) describes these features as providing a rationale for single case study research. My exploration of students' persistence within the bounds of a single undergraduate course and is contextualised within a specific institution. As a 'case' this possesses features that he would consider as examples of a 'extreme/unique' case as well as a 'representative/typical' case (Yin, 2003, p.42-43). I will now briefly demonstrate and discuss some of these features.

The undergraduate student population of my institution is increasing (**Appendix B**) which is representative of expansion within the HE sector as a whole

and the Creative Arts and Design subject area. However, it must be noted that this HESA subject classification is not entirely synonymous with the total range of courses offered by my HEI. The growth of BA Photography is reflected by the increasing numbers of Level 1 students enrolling in each academic year, from 61 students in 2000/2001 to 97 students in 2010/2011.

Previous research also suggests that student withdrawal is most markedly found in the first year of study. This is true across the sector and within my own institution (e.g. Yorke, 2004, 2008; Johnston, 1997, 2002; Parmar, 2004). Therefore it is likely that successful interactions between students and their environment are most important at this time; when connection to the HEI is weakest and post-graduation goals are most distant. This was why Level 1 students were selected as the preliminary sample within my research design.

However, as published HESA statistics show, my institution continually has a lower withdrawal (non-continuation) rate than the HE sector average and the institutional benchmark. The bounded 'case' of BA Photography also performs well institutionally in terms of retaining students. However in 2008/2009 the progression rate was lower than the institutional average. In this year students did not withdraw from the course, but instead of progressing to the next Level of study they repeated (part of) that Level. Supplementary figures in **Appendix A** provide information regarding student progression and transfer in institutional and HE sector contexts.

4.1b Narrowing the case: BA Photography as institutionally 'situated'

A focus on my own teaching area aims for a deeper understanding of persistence throughout the student life cycle. Therefore I have also explored the experience of Level 2 and Level 3 BA Photography students. Tinto (1988) and Elkins et al (2000) suggest that the reasons for withdrawal change at different points within the student lifecycle; it is therefore reasonable to assume that persistence has an equally fluid character.

This choice of course boundary increases the relevance of my study to other contexts. For example, whilst retaining its students BA Photography also has an institutionally high population of 'non-traditional' students (particularly 'mature' students and students with dyslexia). Student characteristics relating to ethnicity,

disability, age, prior qualification and county of domicile held by both the institutional population and BA Photography cohort are shown in detail in **Appendix C**.

The literature indicates that these characteristics are worthy of investigation (and have been considered as part of my sampling strategy). However it is worth noting that these figures do not include other 'non-traditional' characteristics such as being from a low participation neighbourhood, a household with a low income, socio-economic groups 4-7, or being a 1st generation entrant (e.g. Bourn, 2007, p.54). Nor does it explicitly include commuter students (who may have a time-consuming journey to the institution, or live within the family home). The literature (e.g. Halpin, 1990) also suggests that these students also have a different experience in terms of integration into institutional communities.

Internal statistics (**Figures 10 and 11: Appendix A**) suggest students tend to persist in the situated course context of BA Photography. The course has a strong retention rate and high numbers of mature and dyslexic students, despite these non-traditional students being commonly referred to as 'at risk' of withdrawal in the literature. This diverse student demographic may result in the community of BA Photography being slightly dissimilar from wider 'institutional habitus' discussed by Berger (2000) and the nature of this peer group could also impact on students' on-course experiences. Therefore, it is methodologically valid to examine BA Photography at a smaller level of analysis, and to consider different groups of students' experiences as institutionally 'situated'. However, I have aimed to make a clear distinction between interactions at course and wider institutional levels. The mixed demographic of the BA Photography student population provides an appropriate (small scale yet rich) context to explore the interactions between these environments and internal sociological and psychological forces.

4.1c Multi Method research approaches

There are different definitions of 'multi method' strategies (Bazeley, 2002). Caracelli et al (1989) propose that these:

'...include at least one quantitative method (designed to collect numbers) and one qualitative method (designed to collect words), where neither type of method is inherently linked to a particular inquiry paradigm or philosophy.'
(Caracelli, et al (1989, p.256).

This alludes to a critique of mixed methods. There is a perceived epistemological incompatibility of qualitative and quantitative research as they are positioned within opposing positivist and constructivist paradigms (e.g. Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, p.3-11; Creswell, 2003, p.4-11; Morgan, 1998, p.363; Bryman and Teevan, 2005, p.322).

My research is situated more within a pragmatic model (e.g. Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998, p.20-27; Cherryholmes, 1992; Bazeley, 2002). Cherryholmes' (1992) pragmatic comment, 'How would we know if our beliefs described reality?' (Cherryholmes, 1992, p.15) could equally be applied to my beliefs about the nature of photography. Subjective individuals make indexical photographic images (or traces) of the external world. The camera is an objective recording machine, yet it produces photographs that are read (or interpreted) by individuals who are socially, culturally and historically situated.

Hammersley proposes three approaches to multi method research, triangulation, facilitation and complementarity (Hammersley in Bryman and Teevan, 2005, p.324) These overlap with Caracelli et al's (1989) reasons of triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation and expansion, though they conclude that triangulation and complementary research intentions are inappropriate motives for using mixed method research designs (Caracelli et al, 1989, p.271). Morgan (1998) also considers triangulation as a less useful rationale. He recommends the term 'convergence' or 'confirmation' as opposed to 'triangulation' in cross-validating results (Morgan, 1998, p.365). He proposes that complementary sequential designs are more practical (and therefore pragmatic) and as one method is only complementary, 'complete mastery' of it is not necessary (Morgan, 1998, p.372-373). Bazeley (2002) furthers this point, that the results of each mode of data collection should be considered within its own context:

'Triangulation does not assist validation as each source must be understood on its own terms...the original model of triangulation assumes a single reality...corroboration of findings is not only a dubious intention but one that is almost doomed to failure.'
(Bazeley, 2002, p.3)

In my research I have treated confirmation of findings across data sets tentatively. This recognises the different nature of QUAN and QUAL responses and

also within QUAL methods (e.g. interviews and focus groups as constructing individual versus shared meanings (e.g. Kalpowitz, 2000; Bazely, 2002, p.3). However the sequential aspects of the research design in 'waves' encourages a richer understanding of the persistence phenomenon. It is also approach that mirrors my focus on longitudinal nature of the student experience and the potentially changing nature of student/environment interactions. Pure triangulation involves the independent analysis and simultaneous delivery of methods to test the same phenomenon (Jick, 1979; Caracelli and Greene, 1993). However in my research design the QUAN-QUAL methods are deliberately designed to be more interactive (e.g. the same cohort of Level 1 students were invited to give their perception of their experiences on their previous course (e.g. A-Level, National Diploma etc) both prior to enrolment (**Survey 2, Appendix E**) and on course in the February after their enrolment (**Survey 3, Appendix F**). These individual educational experiences were also explored in one-to-one interviews. This sequential delivery (in keeping with the nature of the student lifecycle) also included specific questions about perceptions of self-change within the first 15 weeks of study (e.g. in **Survey 3** and interviews) (Moran in Caracelli et al, 1989).

Mathison (1988) provides an alternative and more useful definition of triangulation. This is researcher orientated and is appropriate in my insider research context:

'Whether the data converge, are inconsistent, or are contradictory the researcher must attempt to construct explanations for the data and about the data...this shifts the focus on triangulation away from a technical solution and places the responsibility with the researcher for the construction of plausible explanations about the phenomena being studied.'
(Mathison, 1988, p.15-17)

Jick (1979) also cites this view that non-convergence is an opportunity for 'enriching' the explanation (Jick, 1979, p.607). Therefore my research, in Caracelli et al's (1989) terms, could be defined as having a developmental research intent, that 'the results of one method [is used] to help develop or inform the other method'. For example this includes my iterative integration of quantitative and qualitative data to inform both typology development (Caracelli and Greene, 1993, p.196-197) and sampling (Caracelli et al, 1989, p.260). However, the research design also inherently internally tests confirmation of findings in a longitudinal sense, (e.g.

delivery of the same questionnaires (e.g. pre-entry **Survey 2, Appendix E** and on course **Survey 3, Appendix F**) to Level 1 cohorts in subsequent academic years of entry. The QUAN-QUAL cycle therefore investigates overlapping but different aspects of persistence (Caracelli et al, 1989, p.258. These include pre-entry (**Survey 2**) questions regarding the reasons for HE study and prior educational experiences, to on-course exploration of personal expectations (being met or not) and perceptions of the relevance of subject material to personal goals.

The use of mixed methods is therefore designed explicitly to explore both 'broader trends and narrow detail' in the QUAN-QUAL sequence (Creswell, 2003, p.100). Bazeley (2002) describes this approach as:

'Attempting to serve the dual purposes of generalisation and in-depth understanding, to gain an overview of social regularities from a larger sample, while understanding the other through detailed study of a smaller sample.'
(Bazeley, 2002, p.4)

The larger sample attracted by quantitative data is recommended by Jick (1979) (in qualitative studies) to aid sampling, developing coding typologies and increase the generalizability of results, and this is how these instruments were used. The (QUAN) methods were not explicitly designed to make generalisations about the larger student population as a whole (e.g. May, 1996, p.65-66). These questionnaires aimed to reach as many participants as possible in order to generate broad themes that could be further explored and contextualised in relation to the literature and in relation to the data collected in interviews and focus groups. Therefore, in Year 1 of the research, the QUAN sample included Level 1 students from all 13 undergraduate courses in my institution. This aimed to provide broad context and generate initial themes (e.g. **Survey 1, Appendix D and Survey 2, Appendix E** in 2007). Subsequently (in 2008 and 2009) when the same data collection instrument was used (**Survey 2**), the sample narrowed to only Level 1 BA Photography students only. However, the QUAL sample remained the same throughout (i.e. only BA Photography students). This aimed to explore suggestive QUAN findings in more depth and capitalize on my own insider observations with this group of students.

This implementation sequence is shown in **Table 1** and can be defined overall in terms of Morse's (1991) Priority Sequence Model as a sequential (QUAN) (e.g. **Surveys 1 and 2**) strategy to establish context and explore initial themes to help

focus subsequent (QUAL) sampling and analysis in situ (Morse in Morgan, 1998, p.368-369). However the sequential 'waves' of research also included a minor (QUAL-QUAN) sequence within BA Photography only. The generalisation and transferability of results from ongoing (QUAL) interviews was explored in (QUAN) mid-year surveys (e.g. **Survey 3; Appendix F**) of BA Photography students.

Table 1 **Research implementation sequence: data collection points**

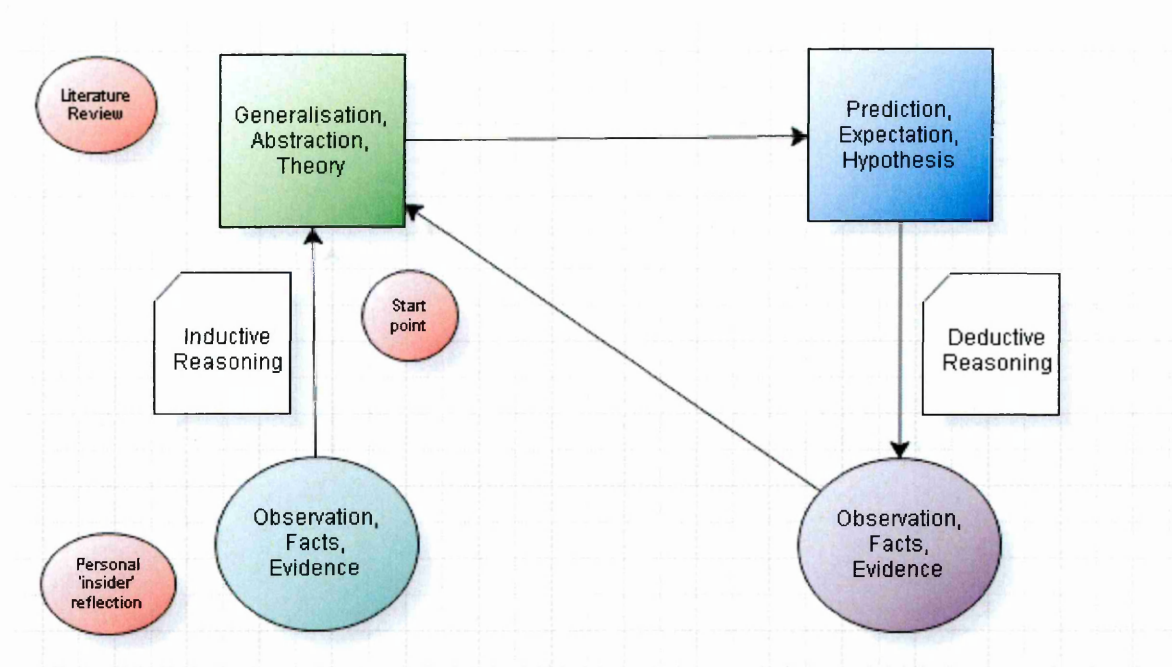
Data collection method	Delivery method	Timing	Participants	Level of Study	Course	Total Population	Response Rate as percentage
Survey 1: Student experience questionnaire (Appendix D)	Verbal	June 2007	Student mentors	1 (2006 entry)	All undergraduate courses	83	83% (n=69) (20% of this total response rate were BA Photography students (n=14))
Focus group 1		June 2007	Student mentors	1 (2006 entry)	BA Photography only	4 students	
Survey 2: Pre-entry questionnaire (Appendix E)	Postal	September 2007	Incoming level 1 students	1 (2007 entry)	All undergraduate courses	Total population: 822 BA Photography total cohort: 81	Institutional response rate: 27% (n=225) BA Photography response rate: 37% (n=30)
Ongoing Fieldwork	9 x 1-1 semi structured interviews	November 2007 – February 2008	Level 1 BA Photography	1 (2007 entry)	BA Photography only	9 students	
Survey 3: On-course questionnaire (Appendix F)	Verbal	February 2008	Level 1 BA Photography	1 (2007 entry)	BA Photography only	Total February cohort: 77 Number of students present: 59	53% of total cohort 69% of total present (n=41)
Survey 4: On-course questionnaire (Appendix H)	Verbal	February 2008	Level 1 BA Photography	1 (2007 entry)	BA Photography only	Total February cohort: 77 Number of students present: 59	53% of total cohort 69% of total present (n=41)
Focus Group 2		February 2008	Level 1 BA Photography	1 (2007)	BA Photography only	4	

Focus Group 3		March 2008	Level 1 BA Photography	(entry)	BA Photography only	5		
Survey 2 (Pre-entry questionnaire (Appendix E))	E-mail & Verbal	September 2008	Incoming Level 1 BA Photography	1 (2008 entry)	BA Photography only	74	49% (n=36)	
Ongoing Fieldwork	27 x 1-1 semi structured interviews	September 2008 – May 2009		Levels 1 2 & 3	BA Photography only	27 students		
Focus Group 4		December 2008	Institutional staff members		Institutional Department: Accommodation & Welfare; Learning & Teaching; International Office; National Recruitment; Widening Participation; Student Union	6		
Survey 3: On-course questionnaire (Appendix F)	Verbal	February 2009	Level 1 BA Photography	1 (2008 entry)	BA Photography only	Total February cohort: 74 Number of students present: 68	74% of total cohort 81% of total present (n=55)	
Survey 2: Pre-entry	E-mail &	September	Incoming Level	1 (2009)	BA Photography	90	67%	

questionnaire (Appendix E)	Verbal	2009	1 BA Photography	entry)	only		(n=60)
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My research questions were placed in an iterative cycle that included grounded inductive reasoning, which went on to inform deductive reasoning and so on. **Figure 3** demonstrates my starting point. This acknowledges my own researcher perspectives and observations as insider researcher coupled with a critical consideration of the themes of discussed in the literature.

Figure 3 Based on The Research Cycle (Cycle of Scientific Methodology) (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p.25)



This approach is appropriate to my research questions. The BA Photography case is 'situated' within a single institution and the UK HE sector as a whole, but (as I previously discussed) these specific contexts are also typical and a-typical. Differentiating between course and institutional contexts supports the generalization of findings and recommendations to other educational contexts (e.g. to both ADM institutions and universities with a more traditional subject mix). Relevance is also enhanced through investigation of the role of student biographical characteristics (e.g. commuter students, mature students) as well as their psychological attributes of personal goals, motivators and confidence levels.

The selection of the QUAN-QUAL design facilitated the preliminary exploration and identification of both unique and typical features of my case (e.g. Stake, 1995) at:

- **HE sector level** (e.g. parity between the reasons for doubting and the literature regarding student withdrawal, e.g. **Survey 1, Appendix D**)
- **Specific institutional level** (e.g. the reasons for attending HE as well as differences between courses within the same HEI, e.g. **Survey 2, Appendix E**)

In an attempt to generate broad initial themes, responses from these surveys were analysed by frequency of response. The findings informed the design of subsequent (QUAL) focus groups and interviews that were conducted within the smaller BA Photography course context. They also informed my sampling strategy within this context, as I was interested in exploring more deeply the ways in which students' personal characteristics might play a role in their experiences.

For example, did students from certain educational backgrounds 'doubt' more than others? Did mature students cite different reasons for entering HE? I felt that neither broad quantitative analysis, nor my own observations alone, could unpick the complex interplays between students and their environment in any depth. The role of individual student characteristics is also a feature of the retention literature and might be generalised into other institutional contexts. I categorised these as:

- **Sociological** (e.g. age, prior qualification)
- **Psychological** (e.g. goals, motivation)

Year 1 of research focussed on Level 1 students as previous research (e.g. Yorke and Longden 2006; Johnston, 1997; Tinto, 1993; Parmar, 2004) as well as institutional records showed that student withdrawal is most common in Level 1 of study. However, I subsequently incorporated a longitudinal element to include (QUAL) participants from all 3 Levels of study. A strong early theme was the idea of different 'push' factors at different times of the year, and these ideas of 'time' and 'change' were common to the Level 1 experience. This concept also finds backing in the literature (e.g. Tinto, 1988; Elkins et al, 2000; Sparrow et al, 2008; Robinson, 2004) and supports my analogy between the practice-based course environment and a community of practice (e.g. Wenger, 1998; 2000), to which this temporal nature is inherent.

Therefore, the conceptual framework used in this research was in part derived from the literature (e.g. as set out in **Figure 1**) but this was refined as Year 1 of the research progressed and tentative findings emerged. These incorporated the academic and social strands of the student experience (e.g. Tinto, 1993), a longitudinal model of student transition (e.g. Tinto, 1998), the 'push' and 'pull' forces described by Mackie, 2001); the role of prior qualifications and academic preparedness (e.g. Lowe and Cook, 2003); the role of the peer community as similar to Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of a community of practice and the notion that different subject areas exist along a profession/non-profession-based continuum (e.g. Leppel, 2001).

4.2 Data Collection Procedures

The research design is longitudinal and consists of a series of data collection points. As I sought to investigate student persistence at different times over the 3 Levels of the student lifecycle, these were organized in 'waves'. The data collection points included an initial probing of the students' perception of their Level 1 experiences, as a minor and preliminary QUAN-QUAL exploration in **Survey 1** and **Focus Group 1**, as well as subsequent delivery of the same QUAN data collection instruments to consecutive cohorts of Level 1 students in each year of the research. These were delivered prior to enrolment (**Survey 2**) and on course, mid year (**Survey 3**). Ongoing QUAL interviews (and focus groups) were carried out throughout the academic year.

This timing was an important consideration in data collection procedures. I wished to reflect the student lifecycle as being longitudinal in character, for example, in terms of the 'course' as a community of practice in which students might have perceived changes in themselves or having experienced the stages of separation, transition and incorporation described in Tinto's transition model (Tinto 1988; 1993). The benefit of this design also enabled me to (over time) compare the responses of individual students and different BA Photography student cohorts. It also allowed me to collect data contemporaneously (e.g. pre-entry **Survey 2**) which helps avoid 'false memory' (Cohen et al, 2005, p.177-8). This was important in exploring responses across data sets, e.g. with regard to comparing participants reasons for attending HE (across BA

Photography Level cohorts in three consecutive academic years) as well as the potential to subsequently explore any modifications to early stated goals (in **Survey 2**) should the same participant subsequently engage with another data collection instrument (e.g. **Survey 3** or take part in an interview).

However, some data collection involved retrospective reporting of experiences and perceptions, i.e. interviews (especially with Level 3 students) and on course **Survey 3**. Given that I propose that students and environments are not static, and both change as a result of their interactions, it may be that this is a limitation of the study. Roberts et al (2003) suggest, 'the adjustment process itself may affect perceptions of how students actually felt [when they entered the first year]' (Roberts et al, 2003, p.10). De Rome and Lewin (1984) take a similar view, that retrospective accounts may be influenced by students' subsequent experiences of institutional interactions:

'It seems reasonable to suggest that after several months persisting students may have a more positive perspective on their enrolment decisions, whereas discontinuing students might rationalize their withdrawal by claiming they had never been committed to that course.'
(De Rome and Lewin, 1984, p.51)

The majority of research participants in interviews and in **Survey 3**, which were conducted on-course, expressed a personal 'change' of some sort. This appears to constitute an attempt for 'honest' reflection (potentially once the participant had begun the course and/or engaged more fully with myself as tutor). However, it is also worthy of consideration that these February participants may have reacted to my research interest in their experiences and subsequently modified their behaviors. Draper (2010) refers to this 'Hawthorne Effect' as occurring when participants are aware that they are being studied. Draper draws on the work of Mayo (1933) and offers a definition of this as:

'An experimental effect in the direction expected but not for the reason expected; i.e. a significant positive effect that turns out to have no causal basis in the theoretical motivation for the intervention, but is apparently due to the effect on the participants of knowing themselves to be studied in connection with the outcomes measured.'
(Draper, 2010)

Mayo discusses the Hawthorne effect as a management effect, rather than a research effect, i.e. that electric workers in the original study performed differently (and were

more productive) as they felt differently and more in control (Mayo in Draper 2010). This relates to my 'insider' research, as the power relations implicit in my teaching role could be seen as similar to the 'managerial' role Mayo refers to. However, it also points to the potential benefits of course evaluation mechanisms in encouraging positive student perceptions and subsequent behavior shifts as a result of having their voices heard.

I will now continue to outline my data collection instruments in more detail.

4.2a Preliminary study (QUAN-QUAL): June 2007

Aims:

- Contextualize Level 1 student experience within the literature/research and insider observations and reflection.
- Generate preliminary themes/coding categories to inform subsequent data collection and analysis.

Data Collection methods:

- **Survey 1** (Level 1 student mentors: all undergraduate courses) (**Appendix D**)
- **Focus Group 1** (Level 1 student mentors: BA Photography only)

At this early stage, due to what I considered the distinctive nature of my art, design and media educational context, I treated the literature as another informant. However, it was also necessary for me to maintain a 'suspension of belief' in these existing theories, and be open to potentially new or surprising findings from **Survey 1** and **Focus Group 1**. Therefore this initially somewhat mirrored a grounded theory approach (May, 1994, p.19). My own insider observations (and my professional role in investigating institutional withdrawal) had led me to suspect that my own research context might possess certain characteristics that might not have been combined, considered, or been contextually relevant, in previous models. For example, these considerations included the differences between residential (Tinto, 1993) and commuter (Halpin, 1990) institutions, the role of students' goals (e.g. Brower, 1992) in a (broadly speaking) more non-profession based subject area (e.g. Leppel, 2001) or the nature of pre-entry academic preparedness (e.g. Lowe and Cook, 2003) in a photographic context (Newbury, 1997a).

Similarly, these observations had led me to believe that there is a plurality to withdrawal decisions (in line with Mackie's (2001) research model and the useful concept of push/pull factors which 'enable' and 'constrain' students). It seemed plausible to me that persistence was similarly multi-faceted. I also felt that initially exploring these challenges in a survey mechanism (**Survey 1, Appendix D**) was a more useful approach than merely investigating institutional withdrawal statistics. Like Johnes and Taylor (1989, p.215) it is my opinion that withdrawal forms are an unreliable data source, and it is my own professional experience that students may seek to rationalize a withdrawal decision (also suggested by Parmar, 2004) or avoid disclosing the true reason(s) for departure. Indeed the majority of responses given on institutional withdrawal forms are 'Personal reasons/Other'. Therefore the theory elaboration approach recommended by Braxton (2000) seemed appropriate in my own specific research context, e.g. in that the utilization of 'helper theories' (such as economic cost/benefit decisions) might aid the exploration of individual students' experiences in a specific art, design and media institutional environment.

Survey 1 and Focus Group 1 followed the sequential (QUAN-QUAL) delivery method discussed previously. It aimed to investigate both the timing and extent of Level 1 student 'doubting', to identify the challenges (or in Mackie's (2001) terms, the 'constraints') that Level 1 students face, as well as students' potentially individual reasons for persisting. A cross-course Level 1 student sample provided the QUAN element of **Survey 1**, and a small sample of Level 1 BA Photography students, the QUAL sample as Cohen et al (2001) suggest that it is impossible to study 'total' populations (in this case BA Photography) as isolated cases (Cohen et al, 2001, p.143).

Survey 1 was an opportunistic and voluntary questionnaire delivered in June 2007 to a convenience sample of 83 student mentors from all 13 undergraduate courses at the end of their Level 1 study. The student mentor role involves Level 2 students supporting new incoming Level 1 students. However, it is possible that these individuals were slightly unrepresentative of the wider student body. As they volunteer to take on mentoring responsibilities, they are perhaps more connected to (or integrated in) the

institution. However, a common reason given for applying for the role was that they had experienced problems themselves. As **Survey 1** aimed to begin generating broad themes, results were treated tentatively.

These student mentors were defined as (2006 entry) 'persisters'. This was 100% of the institutional student mentor population who were attending a training day which equates to the 'class time' that Yorke (2004) recommends for increasing response rates. Delivery of such questionnaires within institutional contexts or class time is a common strategy utilized by educational researchers (de Rome and Lewin, 1984; Cook and Leckey, 1999; Roberts et al, 2003) and resulted in a high response rate of 83% (n=69). The voluntary nature of participation was stressed (as well as issues of confidentiality and anonymity as participants who chose to give their names would only be known to me, as recommended by Sapsford and Abbott (1996) (in Bell, 2005, p.48).

The subsequent (QUAL) focus group consisted of 4, Level 1, BA Photography participants who had previously completed **Survey 1** (and had indicated in **Survey 1: Question 9** that they would be willing to take part in further research). This was important in the selection of these participants. I held **Survey 1** data for these students and would be able to use this to guide the discussion and subsequently examine participant responses across data sets to gauge authenticity of response. I would be able to identify any potential discrepancies in response as a result of the focus group/joint discussion environment (Kalpowitz, 2000) or the retrospective nature of my questions (de Rome and Lewin, 1984; Roberts et al, 2003).

The [QUAN-QUAL] sequencing strategy allowed me to survey a larger number of participants to explore initial themes at institutional level, which was subsequently investigated in more depth within course context (e.g. in terms of the Priority Sequence Model described by Morse (1991) in Morgan, 1998, p.368-369). **Survey 1** aimed to investigate whether or not the common features of the literature regarding the reasons for student withdrawal were applicable in my own institutional setting (e.g. Yorke and Longden, 2008a).

Therefore the design of **Survey 1** included 11 items inviting responses relating to the timing and nature of student doubting and the reasons for subsequent persistence. It was semi-structured and it avoided multiple-choice responses. The aim was to elicit student views and contrast these findings with the literature/my own reflections rather than pre-prescribe or limit possible responses and overtly impose ideas from the literature review at this early stage of data collection.

The responses were inputted into an Excel spreadsheet and the original questionnaires shredded. Subsequent content analysis and broad 'bucket' coding identified preliminary categories (Bazeley, 2007, p.67). These were then considered in terms of frequency of response using Excel functions to minimize the potential for human error in such frequency counts. Therefore, the larger scale and cross-course nature of **Survey 1** helped to identify the (potentially) most salient and general themes regarding the timing and nature of Level 1 students' experience of 'push' factors as well as the site of 'pull' factors which mediated them. This could subsequently be explored in more depth with BA Photography students in **Focus Group 1**. This QUAL element also aimed to explore more fully the academic and social elements of the student experience and begin to make distinctions between course-related, institutional and more individual and personal characteristics which might play a role in the persistence process.

The choice of a BA Photography student sample (rather than cross course participants) was guided by my feeling that my 'insider' status might encourage free discussion. It also allowed me to capitalise on my own insider tacit knowledge thus maximising the potential for my own reflection as another informant. I was also concerned I might maintain a more voyeuristic detachment with students I did not know or that there was a danger of raising false hopes, as on other undergraduate courses I would not be able to change course practices so easily (suggested by Dockrell (1988) as an important ethical consideration).

Therefore I positioned **Focus Group 1** as a form of collaborative feedback (with my own students) though this could be criticised as a form of role confusion on my part.

I ensured the 4 participants varied in background characteristics relating to age and prior qualification. I was also interested in (as they had reported in **Survey 1**) whether they were 'doubters' and considered withdrawal, or whether they were 'non-doubters' and had not. The sample also included circumstantial differences in nationality, ethnicity and type of Level 1 accommodation (living in Halls of Residence, private rented accommodation within the town and commuting from further away).

Doubting was the most important sampling criterion. As my research questions aim to explore student persistence in terms of overcoming challenge I wished to compare parity of the student experience in terms of doubter (3 participants) and non-doubter (1 participant) status. It would also allow some identification of any differences and similarities in these push and pull factors in terms of interactions between individual student contexts and institutional environments.

Internal student biographical identities were not an explicit feature of my sampling strategy at this stage, despite the concept of 'non-traditional' student identity being a key feature of the literature. However my insider experiences as a tutor suggested that age and prior qualification had influenced students' experiences in the past. This is also an example of how findings from the QUAN element of **Survey 1** helped shape the subsequent QUAL focus group. I was particularly interested in exploring the experience of mature (21+) students in more depth as **Survey 1** findings had very tentatively suggested that higher numbers of mature student mentors (42.3%) had doubted and considered withdrawal, than had young (<21) student mentors (27.5%). However, these numbers were small and I felt that wider contextual features were also at work, such as different subjects of study, course structures etc, rather than simply presuming a causal relationship between age and doubting. It is also worth noting that **Survey 1** asked respondents for their age at the time of its delivery in June. These 'mature' respondents included 12 students who were 21 at time of questionnaire delivery, but may have been 20 at October enrolment, and this would not define them institutionally as a mature entrant. However, **Survey 1** had not invited participants to give their prior qualification so similar analysis was not possible and I felt it unethical,

covert research to investigate respondents' institutional student records to clarify this information without permission (despite having access to this data). This resulted in a modification to all subsequent survey designs in that all of these questionnaires explicitly asked voluntary participants to provide their prior qualification.

Focus Group 1 was held off-campus, and was audio-recorded and transcribed. A semi-structured framework of discussion questions around the topic of the student experience was drawn up in advance. This was informed by the literature, the findings from **Survey 1** and my own tacit knowledge as an insider in the BA Photography context. However, participants' status as doubting/non-doubter was not explicitly included in this schedule as I considered it unethical for me to instigate explicit discussion of confidential individual **Survey 1** response in a public focus group context.

The key areas explored in the **Focus Group 1** schedule were as follows:

1) Perceptions of 'the student experience'

This related to the suggestions in the literature that the reasons for withdrawal (and therefore persistence) are multi-faceted, and in response to the overlap in categories of response found in analysis of **Survey 1**. I wished participants to create their own categories of experience that could guide our subsequent discussion without overt imposition, and aid coding and the development of refined categories in **Survey 1** and future data collection.

2) Reflections on positive and negative aspects of the BA Photography Level 1 experience and feelings about progression to Level 2

This was primarily a response to Mackie's (2001) forces of Individual, Social, Organisational and External, the components of which she proposes can work as push/pull factors in the persistence process, as well as investigating how participants positioned their previous abstract definitions of 'the student experience' (above) into their own lived contexts. I also wished to explore potential areas of parity and discrepancy in the Level 1 experience of doubters and non-doubters at analysis stage.

3) Perceptions of support offered by the College

This related to my research questions in terms of evaluating and generating recommendations for good practice as well as measuring students' attitudes to the institution as supportive (e.g. Braxton and Hischy, 2004; Yorke and Longden, 2004). It also allowed clarification of what the nature of this 'support' involved and the importance placed on various sources of support in exploring whether participants referred to broad institutional or local course specific environments in terms of perceptions, positive experiences and interventions.

4) Academic and social problems and motivators

This related to findings from **Survey 1** that participants reported 'people' and 'the course' to be important in encouraging their perseverance. On the surface, this appeared to mirror Tinto's model (1993) of social and academic integration. This also reflected back on definitions of 'the student experience' as multi faceted and was designed to aid refinement of my conceptual framework and subsequent coding (e.g. the placement of 'tutor' as a 'person' within the course environment).

5) **Individual characteristics (e.g. motivation, age) and practical (e.g. finance) push/pull forces**

Mackie (2001) proposes that the 'Individual' sphere is most important for persistence, and findings from **Survey 1** had also suggested that individual characteristics such as personal determination and finance (e.g. money already invested) might be important (to doubting students). This was also an opportunity for me to re-visit the role of biographical characteristics (e.g. mature) more neutrally, as a way of addressing the 'non-traditional' features discussed in the literature but without making negative assumptions based on identity alone.

6) **Expectations about their Level 1 student experience prior to entry and the role of individual pre-entry attributes (e.g. prior qualification, personal goals, subject interest)**

Institutional (AMS) statistics had suggested that students entering the institution with an FE Foundation Diploma qualification progressed through Levels of study more often than A-Level students (who were most likely to intermit). This suggests that prior qualifications may play a role in the persistence process. It was also my own observation (and experience through teaching on my own institutions Foundation Diploma) that these qualifications are more philosophically synonymous with the BA Photography course (than National Diploma study, which Newbury (1997a) discusses as more vocational in nature). However, as discussed in my Literature Review, HEFCE (2010) consider Foundation students to be at medium 'risk' of withdrawal (whilst those with high A-Level scores are not considered at risk). I was particularly interested in this element, as potentially relating to subsequent persistence as I would suggest that Foundation students are better prepared, in that they are more visually and personally mature, and have had more time to experiment within art, design and media and therefore make correct subject specialism choices. They also have more time to decide possible options (Christie et al (2004) suggest that withdrawn students had often been rushed into making choices). Long and Tricker (2004) comment that little research has been undertaken into student expectations and how perceptions of early educational experiences may differ (or not) from original expectations (Long and Tricker, 2004, p.1). Meanwhile, both Parmar (2004) and Mackie (2001) suggest that realistic expectations encourage persistence.

The transcript of **Focus Group 1** was first coded manually (using colour highlighting in Word) and then imported and re-coded in NVivo software. Webb (1999) cites a critique of computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) in that it can 'alienate researchers from their data'. This was a point I took into consideration by manually coding first.

Preliminary broad coding categories of **Focus Group 1** were defined as:

- **References to Internal/insider research**
- **Course related factors**
- **Institutional related factors**
- **Social issues**
- **Individual contexts**
- **External issues and events**
- **Participants acknowledgement of plurality of the student experience including multiple reasons for doubting/non-doubting**
- **Temporality of the student experience**

A new important category emerged, that of a temporal student experience and of it 'getting better' both socially and academically. Time had also been alluded to in **Survey 1** as encouraging persistence for doubters, for example making investments such as organizing housing, finance and increasing amounts of money spent. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980) also suggested that the greater the financial investment, the more likely students were to persist.

Temporality seemed plausible to me, relating to Tinto's (1988, 1993) longitudinal model proposing that 'ties' to the institution also increase over time. This idea also supported my analogy between the nature of the BA Photography course and a community of practice that changes that occur over time (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991). Accumulation of capital is another feature of the literature (e.g. Thomas et al, 2004) and I began to consider the different ways in which students, despite their sociological identity, may gain capital. Questions regarding the idea and nature of personal 'change' and were therefore subsequently included in on-course surveys (**Survey 3, Appendix F**) and explored in one-to-one interviews.

For example, internal institutional statistics suggested Foundation students were most likely to progress without a break from study. I subsequently explored how and if certain prior qualifications (e.g. Foundation diplomas) may provide capital by encouraging realistic expectations and providing greater (photographic) experience and expertise, or conversely how curricular structures and learning and teaching strategies (e.g. feedback) could help (or hinder) students with less advanced or specialized pre-entry qualifications (such as A-Level students). Therefore, prior qualification became a feature of my subsequent sampling strategy. In interviews I sought to explore whether or not increased interaction with the subject material/more independent study environments (either due to prior qualification or increasing amounts of time spent on the course) constitute a form of (educational) capital that students could gain over time. This could be potentially regardless of sociological status or identification as a 'traditional' or 'non-traditional' entrant.

4.2b Level 1 students pre-entry perceptions (QUAN): September 2007, 2008 & 2009

Aims:

- Continue to contextualize students' decision making processes within the literature, particularly regarding the reasons for applying to HE generally, the chosen subject area/course and my own institution as forms of initial personal commitment to the HEI and/or to personal goals (e.g. Tinto, 1993; Stage, 1989; Leppel, 2001) as well as levels and forms of motivation (e.g. de Rome and Lewin, 1984; Brower, 1992).
- Identify and explore students' experiences of their prior qualification as a form of academic preparedness (e.g. Lowe and Cook, 1993) and in terms of perceptions of positive and negative aspects of these courses as synonymous (or not) with the responses to **Survey 1** (the reasons for persistence) and students' evaluations of course/institutional environments in **Focus Group 1**. These responses could also be compared with participants' accounts in the next wave of data collection, 1-1 interviews (which began in November 2007).
- Identify areas where institutional practices could be improved/research recommendations could be made regarding the management of student expectations and information provision (e.g. as suggested by Long and Tricker, 2004; Christie et al, 2003). (In 2009, **Survey 2** was modified to include items that explored academic confidence levels that might inform future BA Photography curriculum design to better support students' academic needs).
- Continue to generate and develop themes/coding categories to inform subsequent data collection and analysis (e.g. to subsequently examine potential individual and BA Photography cohort 'change' (e.g. Tinto's (1988, 1993) transition model of separation, transition and incorporation, the trajectories discussed by Wenger (2000) and any shifts in personal goals (e.g. Stage, 1989; Brower, 1992) through integration of data sets, i.e. the comparison of pre-entry **Survey 2** with future interviews and on-course **Survey 3**, (e.g. a method also used by Milem and Berger (1997) as well as Berger and Braxton (1998) in creating a longitudinal data panel to examine any differences in students involvement with their HEI).

Data Collection methods:

- **Survey 2 (Appendix E)**

September 2007 delivery (Incoming Level 1 students (2007 entry): all undergraduate courses)

September 2008 delivery (Incoming Level 1 students (2008 entry): BA Photography only)

Modifications involved additional questions regarding Level 1 residential status and invited students to evaluate an institutional pre-entry online chat-room. This was delivered via e-mail to BA Photography students only.

September 2009 delivery (Incoming Level 1 students (2009 entry): BA Photography only)

Modifications involved additional questions regarding BA Photography students' confidence levels on a number of academic skills, both generic (e.g. essay writing) and photographically specific (e.g. black and white printing skills).

As discussed above, **Survey 2** related to my developing conceptual framework in that items sought to investigate students' reasons for attending HE, my own institution and their course of study from an economic perspective of perceptions of potential gain (e.g. Stage, 1989; Leppel, 2001; Brower, 1992). Throughout, prescribed lists of responses

were avoided. Though a semi-structured approach was taken, I wished to encourage themes to emerge from the data itself rather than overtly imposing a framework wholly derived from the literature. **Survey 2** was delivered in September prior to enrolment in three consecutive academic years (2007, 2008 and 2009). In the first year of research (2007), it was delivered to new Level 1 students from all undergraduate courses (n=822) (and in subsequent years to BA Photography students only, in 2008: n=74 and in 2009 n=90). This allowed me to define and explore the responses of students enrolling on different subjects. It helped the exploration and comparative analysis of potential variations between courses within my HEI, as different 'situated' contexts. It could help identify where BA Photography, as my primary 'case', was typical and unique in terms of student population and perceptions within a single institutional environment.

This approach also allowed comparison between and aggregation of year-on-year responses from three different cohorts of entering Level 1 BA Photography students. All data was inputted into an Excel spreadsheet (and the original documents shredded/deleted). This also allowed matrix analysis of responses in relation to individual characteristics such as age and prior educational experiences. As this instrument aimed to collect data (e.g. regarding pre-entry expectations and goals) prior to entry BA Photography students' responses could also then be compared with any future responses at individual level (e.g. in 1-1 interviews and on course **Survey 3**) as a means to explore (for example) any changes in students' personal goals and perceptions of expectations being met.

This was also used as a measure to assist assessment of the validity of these latter responses, in terms of the danger of 'false memory' in retrospective accounts. However, de Rome and Lewin (1984), (who investigated student motivation, confidence and commitment based on information gathered at enrolment), also observe certain threats to the validity of very new students' responses. A question (also regarding motivation) in pre-entry **Survey 2** ('How motivated do you feel at the moment in relation to your chosen course?') was problematic and should be treated with caution. The vast majority of respondents reported that they were 'very' motivated in relation to

their course, and these included students who subsequently withdrew from the institution. This suggests more that students experience the 'expectant hope' described by Mackie (2001, p.265), or that they are 'unrealistically optimistic' (as acknowledged by de Rome and Lewin, 1984, p.63) rather than offering any meaningful suggestions regarding a relationship between prior motivation and subsequent persistence. Also, it may be that new students are orientated towards presenting themselves well to their new institution, and mediate their responses accordingly. This is a mechanism that Bryman and Teevan, (2005, p.80-81, p.112) also warn is a risk to validity of response. However, they point out that this social desirability bias is more likely in the presence of an interviewer, so the absence of interview effects was also a benefit of this questionnaire.

Although the findings derived from **Survey 2** should be treated with these threats to validity of response in mind, I considered questions regarding previous educational experiences or reasons for attending my HE less value laden (than questions regarding current level of motivation), as respondents had already secured a place on their chosen course.

Survey 2 was delivered prior to entry and physical arrival on campus, as opposed to during enrolment. I felt that students would feel more likely to feel pressured into completing the questionnaire when they had actually arrived at the HEI. As the enrolment process is formal and institutionally based, it could also discourage perceptions of the research as separate from the institution. I considered new students vulnerable to this, as a form of coercion, and felt the more detached postal/email nature of the delivery method would be more likely to encourage voluntary participation.

The instrument delivery mechanism was changed from postal (2007) to via e-mail (2008 and 2009). I chose not to coerce students (and potentially improve the response rate) by follow up letters or phone-calls due to an imbalance in power relations. However in 2008 and 2009 the questionnaire was delivered again, at the end of Week 1 with the opportunity for questions. This latter verbal approach formed part of

a presentation of my research and photographic interests (which is made by all members of the BA Photography staff team) and the voluntary nature of participation was stressed again. The BA Photography response rate to the postal delivery in 2007 was 37% (n=30) of the total cohort, whilst in 2008 it was 49% (n= 36), and in 2009 the return was 67% (n=60). I would tentatively posit that this increase in returns related to my own increasing engagement with new students in the summer period prior to entry

Also, in 2008 and 2009, **Survey 2** was delivered (to BA Photography students only) after extended summer e-mail contact between new incoming students and me (as Level 1 tutor) and this hopefully encouraged a trust relationship. Additionally, one interview participant (to whom a perception of the HEI as caring about her seemed highly important) explicitly referred to this summer contact as being beneficial. It may be that (as I found in interviews and focus groups) students appreciated having their voices heard and that BA Photography students were more likely to voluntarily return this survey due to perceptions of personal 'benefit' (possibly in the form of improved course practices). I had found that BA Photography students were very willing to participate in this research (e.g. interviews) making frequent reference to my 'insider' status and 'wanting to help', yet I also aimed to balance this with the detachment (of postal/email delivery) that I felt would maximize the voluntary nature of their participation.

Institutional records provided a sampling frame for **Survey 2**. However, Schofield warns that 'if the sampling frame is not fully representative of the population described, then the sample will also be unrepresentative' (Schofield, 1996, p.28). Therefore, another source of bias (in 2007) was the low response rates to a voluntary questionnaire (27% of the total new undergraduate population and 37% of the new BA Photography cohort). A second form of non-sampling error was the potential for institutional administrative errors in defining the total undergraduate population parameters, which limits claims to generalizability (Schofield, 1996, p.27). For example, these data would not account for late entrants. This is, however, very unusual in BA Photography (as a highly selective course) and was not such a concern. However, the aims of **Survey 2**

were to identify broad areas of interest for subsequent exploration (e.g. in interviews). In 2007, it aimed to test the instrument as fit for purpose as a method of longitudinal data collection through delivery to subsequent entering Level 1 cohorts of BA Photography students in 2008 and 2009. It also attempted to initially position BA Photography contexts through comparative analysis of responses between BA Photography students and students entering other subject areas. Therefore, subsequent sampling represented a narrowing of the 'case' and was a 'top down approach' (Cohen et al, 2005, p.92) to the research design as a whole.

I felt that the smaller sample of BA Photography students only would allow me to follow up responses more effectively in qualitative interviews in terms of time and my insider status. However, a number of new questions were introduced, as the instrument was developed year on year. These were integrated with the findings of other data collection instruments, my ongoing reading, and my aim to ultimately make recommendations for institutional practices. In the 2008 delivery, these new items reflected the findings of **Survey 1**, (and the findings of the 2007 delivery of **Survey 2**) which suggested that 'people' were important in the persistence process. These related to students' residential status on campus and evaluation of a pre-entry online 'chat-room' (in relation to students' socialization and integration processes). By 2009, the accumulation of data from both surveys and ongoing 1-1 interviews had also suggested the importance of 'the course'. Additional questions, therefore, were incorporated in **Survey 2** (2009). These related to students' prior confidence levels in a range of core academic and photographic skills (which might later inform curriculum development of the BA Photography course to better meet students' academic needs).

4.2c Level 1, BA Photography students on-course perceptions (QUAL + QUAN): November 2007 – May 2009

Aims:

- Contextualise the student experience with specific regard to positive and negative interactions which occurred at the different levels of the wider institution and of the BA Photography course

- Further explore themes emerging from previous findings with particular regard to the importance and identity of 'people' and the individual nature (both sociological and psychological) of 'best fit' with the course environment in the persistence process
- Investigate the temporal nature of the student experience and any 'changes' experienced by the participant
- Continue to generate and define themes/coding categories to aid development of the conceptual framework
- Identify areas of good practice (which support students persistence) at the levels of the institution and BA Photography course

Data Collection methods:

- **One-to-one interviews**
November 2007 – February 2008 (BA Photography students: Level 1 only)
September 2008 – May 2009 (BA Photography students: all 3 Levels of study)
- **Survey 3 (Appendix F)**
February 2008 delivery (Level 1 students: BA Photography, 2007 entry)
February 2009 delivery (Level 1 students: BA Photography, 2008 entry)
 Modifications involved additional questions regarding the timing and nature of doubting and considering withdrawal and the subsequent reasons for persistence. It also involved a re-design of a question that aimed to explore students' goals from a numerical ranking mechanism used in 2008 (which students had found confusing) to a simpler tick box Likert scale (question 15).
- **Survey 4 (Appendix H)**
February 2008 delivery (Level 1 students: BA Photography, 2007 entry)
 This instrument was not used in data analysis for this research. On subsequent reflection, I considered this more appropriate as a mechanism for course evaluation and development as part of my teaching role. It was an example of confusion between the purposes of this research and my 'insider' role as tutor. It has subsequently been developed as a tool for BA Photography student Representatives to use with Level cohorts as a student led course evaluation.
- **Focus Group 2 and 3**
February and March 2008 (Level 1 students: BA Photography 2007 entry)
- **Focus Group 4**
December 2008 (Institutional (non-academic) staff members)
 Findings from this focus group have not been used explicitly within this research. It sought to understand students' needs, in a temporal sense, from a staff perspective. It explored staff perceptions of common difficulties at different times in the academic calendar (in relation to Tinto's (1988) model of transition, separation and incorporation, of 'hot spots' (e.g. Johnston, 2007) within the academic year (e.g. around assessment) as well as indicating any areas for improved institutional practices to better support students. It also offered me the opportunity to share/discuss the tentative findings of this research with institutional colleagues. However, although I have personally reflected on the findings of this focus group, like Survey 4, I subsequently considered it more appropriate to my professional role rather than the purposes of this study.

This wave of data collection and analysis sought to explore students' perceptions whilst they were 'on-course', rather than the pre-entry responses elicited in **Survey 2** and also maintained the QUAN-QUAL research design. Qualitative fieldwork comprised of 2 focus groups held with Level 1, BA Photography students, 1 focus group held with institutional (non-academic) staff (held on campus) and (overall) 36 semi-structured individual interviews with BA Photography students (held off campus). The quantitative element was introduced in **Survey 3 (Appendix F)**, which sought to explore the experiences of two consecutive cohorts of Level 1 BA Photography in both 2008 and 2009, at the February mid year point. **Survey 4 (Appendix H)** was also delivered in February 2008, though the data was not used as part of this study, as I felt it more appropriate that this was positioned as mechanism for students to evaluate the course as part of my professional role as a lecturer. I will first discuss the QUAN elements of data collection relating to **Survey 3**, and then move on to the related QUAL individual interviews, showing how the two methods informed one another in terms of reciprocity between the interview schedules and survey items. I conclude this section by discussing my rationale for the exclusion of the remaining data collection instruments in this 'wave' (**Focus groups 2, 3 and 4 and Survey 4**) from this study.

Survey 3 (Appendix F) was delivered to 2 consecutive Level 1 cohorts of BA Photography students who were on-course. It was presented in class time, importantly after the February mid year assessment point (to avoid any perceptions of coercion). Again, the voluntary nature of participation was stressed. In 2008 the response rate was 69% (n=41) of students present on the day (53% of the total February cohort) and in 2009 the return was 81% (n=55) of students present on the day (74% of the total February cohort). However, this may constitute a source of bias, in that it only includes students who were motivated enough to attend the session, a point made by Cook and Leckey (1999) who similarly administered questionnaires during taught sessions (Cook and Leckey, 1999, p.160).

This represents a further narrowing of my (QUAN) sampling frame to the level of a single undergraduate course (BA Photography). This boundary had already been a

feature of the QUAL elements of my data collection. The narrowing of focus further recognises the importance of the 'situated' nature of the course, context and subject. However, (as I will expand upon in the next section) though the QUAL research participants had always been BA Photography students, the boundaries of this sample also widened from being Level 1 students only (from November 2007 – February 2008), to include students from all three Levels of study (from September 2008 – May 2009).

The timing of interviews with Level 1 students was scheduled to begin in the November after their enrolment. This was firstly as an ethical consideration, so that students could build up more of a trust relationship with myself as an insider researcher. Secondly the later timing meant that participants had more experience of institutional environments, and could be more evaluative and meaningful about these interactions. Students were invited to participate in individual interviews via e-mail and in verbal form at the beginning of a lecture. In total, 36 individual interviews were conducted. 9 of these were with Level 1 students (prior to February 2008) and subsequently (between September 2008 and May 2009). A further 27 interviews with students from all Levels were conducted. These consisted of 10 students from Level 1, 11 students from Level 2 and a further 6 students from Level 3 of study. However, dictaphone corruption meant that only 30 of these interviews could be transcribed, though my interviewer notes were still available for these 6 interviews. All available transcriptions were coded and (like **Focus Group 1**), this was done first on paper to maintain context (as recommended by Webb, 1999) and were subsequently coded using NVivo software.

All participants were reminded about the nature of the research and of their rights to refuse to participate/withdraw at any time. Issues of confidentiality and anonymity were defined, and potential risks such as the potential for certain features of their accounts being identifiable were explained. This discussion was recorded and was part of the transcription. Initially, however, (e.g. early 1-1 interviews and **Focus Groups 2 and 3**) this was not provided in writing. This was a result of inexperience on my part, as well as the common practice in art and design of discussing and giving feedback verbally.

Both the British Sociological Association (BSA) (2002) and the Open University (2006) recommend the provision of information sheets detailing these agreements. Therefore, I sought written consent in subsequent interviews (**Appendix I**), based on the consent forms provided in previous research by Taylor and Littlejohn (2008). The consent of the early research participants was sought subsequently using this written documentation, as I still had close contact with these participants through my insider role.

Both on-course **Survey 3** and the schedule for 1-1 individual interviews covered similar areas, as part of the overall mixed method strategy used in this study. I felt that interviews alone would not have met my aim of exploration and theme generation due to smaller numbers (Cohen et al, 2005, p.271). However, Bryman and Teevan (2005) suggest that self-administered questionnaires are similar to structured interviews, and they are more convenient and quick to administer to large populations (i.e. whole cohorts of Level 1 BA Photography students). On the other hand, interviews gave the opportunity to further explore these themes within individual contexts.

Therefore the key areas covered in both the survey and interview instruments included items relating to:

1) Student doubting and the reasons for persistence

This related to previous studies by Christie et al (2004) and Roberts et al (2003). It attempted to investigate the different push and pull factors (e.g. Mackie, 2001) that individual participants had experienced and what (internal and external forces) had helped overcome them. It also attempted to unpick previous findings (**Survey 1**) that 43% of BA Photography student mentors had doubted in Level 1, in relation to findings by Young et al (2007) who proposed that doubters and non-doubters had more in common than differences (Young et al, 2007, p.283).

2) Temporality of the student experience

Questions in this area related to Tinto's (1988, 1993) transition model of separation, transition and incorporation and the temporal nature of the 'trajectories' discussed by Wenger (2000). It aimed to explore if, how and why participants might have changed since they had arrived on the course, (also explicitly asked in **Survey 3**) as well as whether (or not) they perceived push and pull forces to operate in different ways at different times during this experience.

3) Psychological selves

Brower (1992) suggests that students' 'life task predominance' is important to for persistence, particularly with regard to achievement or affiliation orientations (Brower, 1992, p.452). Participants were invited to talk about their goals, the reasons for attending my institution and course (as also explored in **Survey 2** as well as levels of confidence and motivation and perceptions of the relevance/importance of different aspects of the BA Photography course in relation to these (these were also explicitly investigated in **Survey 3**). The role of feedback (e.g.

Yorke, 2001) was particularly explored. These initial and subsequent 'commitments' were positioned temporally and participants were encouraged to discuss any shifts or changes, the reasons for them and the cost/benefit dimensions of their persistence in terms of what the HEI and course was offering (e.g. Leppel, 2001).

4) Sociological background and previous individual experiences

The literature characterizes non-traditional students as 'at-risk' of withdrawal (e.g. Select Committee for Education and Employment) whilst studies by Christie et al (2004), Roberts et al (2003) and Young et al (2007) critique this focus. Johnes and Taylor (1989) usefully account for the individual forces that might act as push/pull forces as a result of lived contexts and characteristics despite a 'non-traditional' or otherwise 'disadvantaged' personal context (e.g. familial support for mature students or a lower financial burden for commuter students who live at home). Items within this section of the interview schedule aimed to explore how the different lived contexts of participants' identities (particularly age, residential status and previous qualification) may have acted as push/pull forces on their student experience and also how these related to their goals. For example, did students from a National Diploma background have more vocational or practice based goals? (e.g. Newbury 1997a). Did commuter/local students experience dual socialization? (e.g. Rendon et al, 2000) and/or were they more interested in academic integration? (e.g. Halpin, 1990).

5) Reflections on sources of support

Questions in this section related to the predominance of 'people' found in earlier research e.g. **Survey's 1 and 2** (2007) as a reason for persistence/best thing about previous course as well as Tinto's (1993) concept of social integration. They aimed to identify the sources of support for individual students (e.g. tutors, friends, peers, family, friends outside the HEI) that had influenced persistence (or not) and could be used to identify participants as 'achievement' or 'affiliation' orientated (Brower, 1992). It also investigated whether these sources of support/motivation orientations had changed as participants progressed through the course.

6) Reflections on positive and negative aspects of institutional and BA Photography course provision

These related to my research questions in terms of evaluating and generating recommendations for good practice, measuring students' attitudes to the institution as supportive (e.g. Braxton and Hirschy, 2004; Yorke and Longden, 2004) and the importance of 'the course' in persistence (found in **Survey 1** and **Survey 3**) It also allowed clarification of what the nature of this 'support' involved and the identification of various sources of support as located in broad institutional or local course specific environments in terms of positive experiences, potential interventions and subsequent persistence.

Focus group 2 (4 participants) and **Focus group 3** (5 participants) were conducted with Level 1, BA Photography students after the 1st semester point (February/March). Like the preliminary study (**Survey 1** and **Focus group 1**) conducted in June 2007, this formed a minor QUAN-QUAL cycle within the BA Photography course boundaries as these focus groups were positioned to further explore the findings of both **Surveys 3 and 4**.

These offered highly useful insights into areas where the BA Photography course/my HEI could improve existing practices, and offered me much to reflect upon and explore in subsequent 1-1 interviews (e.g. regarding the potential role of these external environments as contributing to push/pull forces). However, I felt that participants had positioned these focus groups as explicitly aiming to evaluate the course (therefore also constructing me as their tutor rather than a researcher). Discussion was highly orientated around participants' perceptions of the external aspects of course and institutional provision rather than exploring individual reasons for persistence (of which external factors are a part), as the one-to-one interviews did.

I believe this misunderstanding was the result of delivering **Survey 4** prior to these focus groups (which invited explicit evaluation of the course environment). This external focus did not occur so strongly in the (similarly QUAN-QUAL designed) preliminary study in June 2007 (**Survey 1** had invited more personal responses regarding individual student decision making and experiences). Therefore **Survey 4** was not delivered in the subsequent cycle of data collection the following academic year (2009). However **Survey 3** (which invited more personal responses) was delivered to the subsequent cohort of Level 1 students.

The findings from **Survey 4**, and **Focus groups 2 and 3** informed my reflection on my research, for example, the positive aspects of institutional provision and the need to evaluate the Level 1 Photography curriculum design to better support diverse students academic/photographic needs (which was an addition to **Survey 2** in 2009). I felt that the findings of both **Survey 4** and **Focus groups 2 and 3** were more appropriately situated in relation to my professional role, therefore they were not explicitly included as part of this study.

However, this focus on external forces did encourage me to reconsider my research design. Subsequent qualitative research only consisted of 1-1 interviews where I could be sure that participants were fully aware of the nature of the research, and my ethical concerns relating to participants discussing personal experiences in a group situation would be minimised. Kalpowitz (2000) suggests that different meanings are

constructed in group and individual qualitative research. He found that it was 18 times more likely that an individual interviewee raised a sensitive topic than it was for focus group participants to do so (Kalpowitz, 2000, p.426). Therefore, as my conceptual framework situates persistence as a process of interaction between individual and environment, individual interviews seemed the most appropriate means to maintain ethical sensitivity and capture participants' reflections on the internal and 'individual' dimension of their experience.

Focus group 4 was conducted in December 2008, with 6 members of institutional staff. These were mainly support staff, but also included Student Recruitment and the Student Union. The aim was to explore staff perspectives of the student experience and attempt to develop a timeline of common challenges that colleagues felt that students experienced at different times of the academic year. Young et al (2007) explored academic staff perceptions, finding they were more likely to blame students for withdrawal, whilst students themselves were more likely to identify aspects of institutional provision. However, this was not the case in **Focus group 4**, (perhaps because this focus group involved non-academic staff members). In jointly identifying common challenges (which might lead to doubting or withdrawal) I wished to explore practical institutional strategies that could be put in place. This positioned **Focus group 4** (like the previous **Focus groups 2 and 3** and **Survey 4**) as more related to my professional role, rather than this study.

Overall, longitudinal (QUAN) data on the 2007 and 2008 Level 1 BA Photography entering cohorts were collected at two points in the student lifecycle. The first was prior to entry in September (**Survey 2**) and the second at the end of the 1st semester (**Survey 3**). However, the 2009 entry cohort was only invited to respond to **Survey 2**. This mirrors the data collection timeframe (for example) of Milem and Berger (1997) who sought to examine changes in students' 'involvement' in the HEI. Cook and Leckey (1999) also used a similar dual survey design to identify any changes in students' opinions in the first semester. Many studies that collect data from the same participants at different points in time (e.g. Berger and Braxton, 1998; Cook and Leckey, 1999) construct a

longitudinal panel of analysis comprised only of students who had completed both questionnaires. However, the quantitative element of my own study did not seek to 'track' individual students in this way, nor produce statistical 'truths'. Rather this element served as a guide to inform the (QUAL) element of ongoing individual interviews, and build a more general understanding of students' perceptions of their experience; their motivations and goals etc. Therefore the analysis of **Surveys 2 and 3** included Level 1 students who had only completed one of the instruments, rather than only students who had completed both.

The aim of this QUAN-QUAL data collection timeframe was to explore how and if students perceived they had changed, as well as give them time to experience the actual environment of the course and institution. Halpin (1990) criticized a study by Webb (1998) that surveyed students only at the beginning of their degree course. The findings suggested that clear educational and degree plans predicted persistence. However, as Halpin points out, Webb did not then continue to examine the actual experiences of these students as they interacted with their institution after this point (as this study does). Therefore the study cannot address how these experiences may/may not have modified persistence decisions (Halpin, 1990, p.24). De Rome and Lewin's (1984) hypothesis was that persistence would be predicted by students' motivation, confidence and commitment at enrolment. This similarly neglects the potentially mediating role of the HEI. In my research **Survey 3** and ongoing interviews attempt to explore these issues.

However, as my study progressed, and as part of an overall deepening research strategy, the QUAL element of individual interviews became more of a priority. The QUAN element of the research design had reached saturation point and the same themes had emerged in research findings from different cohorts (Ambert et al, 1995, p.885-886). The conceptual framework underpinning this research looks to interactions between internal (student) and external (institutional) spheres. Therefore it was increasingly important to explicitly view persistence through the lens of individual

student contexts, both sociological and psychological, over all 3 Levels of Study. I will now discuss how this subsequently impacted upon my sampling strategy.

4.3 Research sampling strategies

The sampling strategy evolved in tandem with the focus of my research questions and 'case'. The study had initially explored Level 1 student persistence at institutional level, but this shifted to a more situated approach that focused on persistence within the boundaries of a single course (BA Photography). It was also refined in response to ongoing research findings (from both the early QUAN and QUAL elements of the 'waves' of research) and the development of the **Literature Review**. This was most notably related to the potential influences of age, prior qualifications and Level 1 residential status in the persistence process. I was also interested in further exploring any changes (in the reasons for persistence) that might occur in relation to the Level of study within the BA Photography course context.

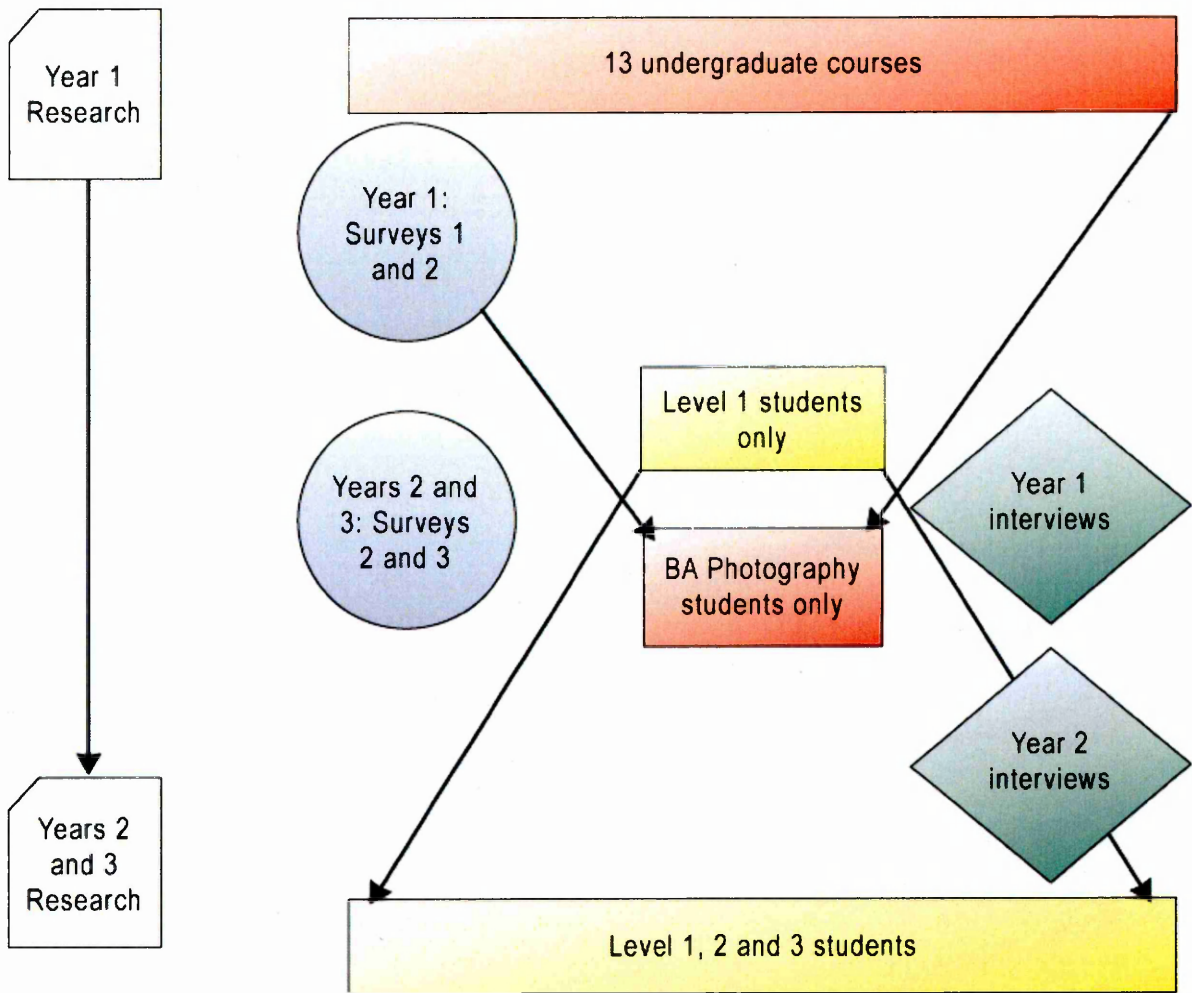
As this is a multi method study, these modifications were developed slightly differently across quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. As demonstrated in **Figure 4**, it was important to study the 'case' in exploratory contextual breadth (characterised mainly by the QUAN elements of the design) and situated depth (characterised by the QUAL elements).

Schofield (1996) warns that:

'If the sampling frame is a biased representation of the population to be studied, increasing sample size will not help, the bias will remain.'
(Schofield in Sapsford and Jupp, 1996, p.28)

Therefore, as recommended by Cohen et al, (2005), the early modification of shifting the parameters of the student population studied to course (rather than institutional) level, though reducing the overall sample size, enhanced the representativeness of the sample. For example, this occurred through the qualitative aspects of purposive interview sampling. It also increased the response rate and provided greater access as 'insider' research (Cohen et al, 2005, p.92).

Figure 4 **Model of changes made to sampling strategy with regard to undergraduate course & Level of Study**



4.3a Narrowing the sampling boundaries (QUAN)

First, my participant sample narrowed. In 2007, **Survey 1** was delivered to Level 1 student mentors from all 13 undergraduate courses within my institution (including BA Photography) and **Survey 2** was delivered to new incoming Level 1 students, again, from all courses. However subsequently (in 2008 and 2009) **Surveys 2 and 3** were only delivered to Level 1 BA Photography students. This strategy is defined as a 'funnelling sampling sequence, working from the outside into the core of a setting' (Erickson in Miles and Huberman, 1994).

As I discussed previously, the rationale for this was to initially generate broad themes and aid the development of my conceptual framework. In early (2007) QUAN findings could suggest generic institutional contexts (e.g. regarding institutional rural location, the role of Halls of Residence). The subsequent narrowing of focus (to BA Photography only) worked in tandem with the QUAL element of individual interviews, and further examined themes as they operated in situ at course level (e.g. the importance of 'people' (**Appendix N**) in students' previous educational experiences which was suggested by **Survey 2**).

Early (2007) findings from **Surveys 1 and 2** further 'situated' the BA Photography course context (and informed subsequent research) through the comparative analysis of responses between different undergraduate courses within the same HEI. For example, this involved comparing the goals of new students from different courses. This related to Leppel's (2001) consideration of different subjects as existing along a profession-non-profession based continuum, and Stage's (1989) discussion of student motivations for entering HE.

4.3b Focusing the sampling boundaries (QUAL)

Surveys 1 and 2 were broad and utilised larger samples that crossed course boundaries. However, ongoing qualitative methods of data collection were characterised by a purposive participant sample at BA Photography course level from the outset. However, in line with my conceptual framework, I took care in my content

analysis to make distinctions between factors that operated at broad institutional levels (e.g. Halls of Residence) and those that acted at the level of the course itself (e.g. interest in the subject of study).

In Patton's (1980) terms, BA Photography students experience generic 'typical' institutional environments. However, as a peer group within the institution, they represent an 'extreme' sample, due to high levels of non-traditional entrants (particularly mature students and dyslexic students, **Appendix J**). They are a 'critical' sample due to the nature of photographic education itself. Finally, they are a 'convenient' sample, as insider research provides the opportunity to learn more and the opportunity for closer access to the students' context (Patton in Cohen et al, 2005, p.144). Therefore, my choice of focus on BA Photography students represents 'critical' sampling that has the potential to transparently generalize to other contexts, identify good practices and apply recommendations to other courses or institutional contexts (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.28). Positioning my qualitative sampling boundaries at course level also allowed integrative investigation of the role of students' background characteristics and sociological identity and their personal psychological perceptions, goals and perceptions of cost/benefit (e.g. Leppel, 2001). I define these as 'internal' factors in my conceptual framework.

As the research progressed, I wished to more explicitly incorporate and explore these sociological identities within my data set as a whole. I had initially felt that a concentration on these characteristics might constitute the deficit model of (non-traditional) student withdrawal that I critique in the Literature Review. I discuss this position in the research rationale since it risks a disregard of the potentially additional mediating factors that 'non-traditional' students may also possess (e.g. the individual psychological factors or attributes which could buffer any student from challenge). Cantwell et al (2001) provide an excellent example of this. They found that persisting mature students performed better academically, and that they were good time managers, especially if female and coping with familial responsibilities (Cantwell et al, 2001, p.233). Additionally, a concentration on biographical detail alone does not

account for the role of external institutional environments in supporting persistence (e.g. adequate support services, course feedback mechanisms).

The expansion of my research to include Level 2 and 3 students is also relevant to a study of persistence. Roberts et al (2003) point out that 'the focus remains on withdrawal; persistence is not fully examined' (Roberts et al, 2003, p.3). Given the temporal nature of the student experience (e.g. Tinto, 1988) I wished to explore any shifts in participants' perceptions and/or their reasons for persistence as they progressed through the 3 Levels of study. I also aimed to select at least one student from each Level who also fitted the primary categories of age, prior qualification, and (after this) Level 1 residential status.

This longitudinal dimension also addressed the critique of single year studies by Sparrow et al (2008) and Robinson (2004) who argue that they are not indicative of persistence throughout a course. A single Level study could also veil the potential for longitudinal changes within mediating internal and external spheres. For example as students progress into more independent and self-determined learning environments individual goals beyond the institution may become more important in the persistence process. Finally, whilst Level 1 students (nationally, and in my own institution) are more likely to withdraw, Level 2 and Level 3 student departure is given a relative lack of attention in the literature. This would also constitute an area for further research. Despite students' potentially greater investment in the institution, a focus on Level 1 alone could limit opportunities to make recommendations for institutional interventions in practice (an important aim of my research) and as such addresses a gap in the literature.

My research also sought to integrate students' sociological and psychological frameworks, rooted firmly within the context of ongoing interaction with the situated environment of both course and institution. As I wish to make recommendations for practice, this approach aimed to encourage 'fuzzy' generalisations to other institutional contexts (e.g. relating to student identity) (Bassey in Bell, 2005, p.12; Yin, 2003, p.10). I

will now further describe these strands of my sampling strategy within the qualitative interviews. All of these took place at the level of the BA Photography course itself.

4.3c Sampling by BA Photography participant biographical identities

I reflected on my personal egalitarian and practical stance in the context of my research questions (which incorporate the nature of overcoming 'challenge' as a facet of persistence). I concluded that my research design had initially (in Year 1 of this research) overly rejected what I continue to consider to be a quite a biased student retention literature. As the qualitative research progressed, it became apparent that students from different backgrounds constructed their reasons for persistence in slightly different ways, and this related to age, prior qualification, and living in Halls of Residence (or not). This was also synonymous with my own observations (as tutor) that Level 1 students from a Foundation Diploma (as opposed to National Diploma or A-Level qualifications) seemed (initially) more at home in the BA Photography course environment. In practice, this shift to accept (and to pro-actively incorporate) these internal attributes as part of my sampling strategy demonstrates the 'critical subjectivity' that Reason (1988) recommends. It represents my recognition that '...we do not suppress our primary experience; nor do we allow ourselves to be swept away and overwhelmed by it' (Reason (1988) in Bazeley, 2004, p.22).

Cohen et al (2005) recommend that the characteristics that define these homogenous groups should be as simple as possible. HEFCE (2010) highlight only two 'non-traditional' biographical characteristics (of age and prior qualification) as being of concern for their funding allocation for student retention (in my research context; persistence). These are also reflected in the literature (e.g. McGivney, 2003; Lowe and Cook, 2003). However, my early research findings (e.g. **Focus Group 1**) suggested that additional biographical factors such as living in Halls or commuting (e.g. Halpin, 1990) could also play a role in the persistence process. I therefore added a question regarding students' Level 1 residential status in **Survey 2** in 2008 and 2009). These factors were explored in interviews and the findings suggested that indeed residential status did influence students' socialisation processes. In Tinto's (1993) model, this socialisation, in

turn, promotes persistence. Therefore, this was a key area for further investigation in Year 2 of the study. The selection of interview participants (after February 2008) was an approximation of a non-random quota sampling strategy. The categories used on this axis of sampling related to students' internal, individual attributes of:

- Level of study
- Age
- Prior qualification
- Level 1 Residential status

These biographical (or sociological) characteristics are 'factual' and unchanging over time whereas my research had suggested students internal (psychological) goals or motivations could change. Therefore, these represented more valid homogenous groups to act as categories. Quota sampling aims to represent selected characteristics as representative of the wider population (i.e. the BA Photography course) (Cohen et al, 2005, p.103). Interview participants' biographical attributes could be compared with institutional records regarding the wider course population however, internal psychological factors could not.

First, I explored institutional records in the form of the BA Photography Annual Monitoring Statements (AMS). I wished to enhance external validity by using this approximate quota sampling strategy regarding age, prior qualification and county of domicile (i.e. whether or not students were local). I aimed to be able to generalise more easily from the interview sample as being reasonably representative of the course cohort as a whole (Searle, 2000, p.138-139; Cohen et al, 2005, p.103). However, this research study is exploratory in nature and probability sampling itself does not eliminate sampling error (Bryman and Teevan, 2005, p.216). Therefore as a case study, the issue of representativeness is secondary to research transparency and the subsequent potential to generalise to other contexts in an informed manner.

Morse (1998) suggests that participant anonymity is compromised the more identifiers are linked together (in this case, biographical characteristics). This occurs particularly when these characteristics are presented and linked in tabular form by

individual participant. Morse recommends grouping by characteristic only (Morse, 1998, p.302).

Table 2 aggregates the characteristics of the total number of individual interview participants within this study. Another data set was available for 72% of these students (i.e. they had also completed a Survey item). The transcripts from interview participants in Year 1 of the research were revisited and iteratively re-analysed and incorporated into the overall study as the research progressed. However, in year 2 participants were selected non-randomly as I wished to approximately reflect the characteristics of age and prior qualification of the BA Photography cohort shown in the Institutional Annual Monitoring statistics. The figures shown in **Table 2** are represented as a bar chart in **Appendix J** and demonstrate the representativeness of the interview sample from the BA Photography course cohort in terms of age, prior qualification and county of ordinary domicile. Figures in **Appendix C** show the broader characteristics of the BA Photography course cohort and the total institutional student body as recorded in the institutional Annual Monitoring Statements.

Table 2 The characteristics of interviewees compared with the overall BA Photography cohort. (These are compared with the BA Photography population where statistics were available from the institutional Annual Monitoring Statements)

	Total Interviews (n=36)	BA Photography entire undergraduate population				
Level of study						
Level 1	53%					
Level 2	31%					
Level 3	17%					
Age						
		2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
Traditional age <21	69%	60%	66%	79%	76%	77%
Mature (>21 total)	31%	40%	34%	21%	24%	23%
Mature (21-30)	19%					
Mature 31+	11%					
Prior Qualification						
		2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
Foundation/National Diploma	58%	67%	67%	63%	59%	59%
A-Level	19%	16%	16%	16%	24%	24%
Other qualifications	22%					
Residential Status in Level 1						
Halls of residence	58%					
Family Home	11%					
Private accommodation	38%					
Commuter	13%					
		2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9
Domiciled within county	14%	11%	13%	13%	12%	14%

However, there are several problems with these approximations. First, the characteristics of the BA Photography course changes yearly. My Literature Review discusses the situated nature of the course as a community of practice where ‘peer norms’ could influence persistence decisions. However, given this changing population of course Levels, this sample is not 100% accurately representative. Second, the complexity of my research is not reflected in institutional records. These aggregate (over

all 3 Levels of study) students with National Diploma and Foundation in Art and Design qualifications. They adhere strictly to the HEFCE (2010) definition of mature students as simply being over 21 at entry, whereas I make a distinction between 'mature' students who are over/under 30 years old.

Third, current institutional records do not define in enough detail the nuances of Level 1 residential status. For example, a student may be 'local' in that they are ordinarily domiciled within the county, however they may still live in Halls of Residence. Conversely, a 'commuter student' may have a time consuming journey to the institution, yet not be 'local' or normally live within the area. Students might reside in Halls of Residence for only a small amount of time, (e.g. Term 1) and institutional records regarding residential status are often incomplete and may not be up to date. To overcome these difficulties, a dimensional sampling approach was used in this category. Whilst age and prior qualification were the primary sampling categories, I aimed to select at least one participant who held the variety of combinations of residential status.

'Other qualifications' included participants with international or vocational qualifications or existing undergraduate degrees. 'Commuter' students (defined as those who lived beyond the limits of the town where my institution is situated), and students who were ordinarily domiciled in the county were identified, to explore the potential for dual socialisation (e.g. as discussed by Rendon et al, 2000, p. 135-138). Whilst not a guiding factor, other contextual information was recorded including participants' status as a direct entry student (who enters the course in Level 2 or 3); or being a non-UK domiciled international student.

Gender, ethnicity or disability (e.g. dyslexia) was not taken into consideration as part of my sampling strategy, (ethnicity and disability are also considered 'sensitive' personal data by the Data Protection Act, 1988). These characteristics are a feature of the (mainly American) literature (e.g. Braxton and Berger (1998) found differences between white and non-white students social integration). However, my early (Year 1) findings did not suggest that these played a significant role in the persistence process in

my own institutional/course context (nor did my own observations as part of my professional role).

However, Goldfinch and Hughes (2007) did not find age (or social class) to be an important factor in whether students passed Level 1 of study (which is not an indicator of persistence or progression in my research context). Christie et al (2004) criticize studies based on social class alone and my study might add to the literature in that it looks to matrixes of other factors that may play a role in persistence. However, the lack of importance given to these identities may be a limitation in this study, and be perhaps an area for future 'situated' research in other educational contexts and subject areas. For example, in a photographic context, Fuirer (1989) discusses the idea that photographers are often represented as (active) male and white, and that these individuals make images of (passive) female or ethnic minority subjects. Future research within photographic education might seek to explore how these looks form a 'legitimised dominance' and how female or ethnic minority photographic students position themselves within this discourse (Fuirer, 1989, p.45-46).

4.4 Data analysis & ongoing development of the conceptual framework

My conceptual framework (**Figure 1**) was derived from a combination of the literature, my own insider observations and the findings of early QUAN-QUAL research 'waves'. It situates persistence as a result of interactions between the internal and external spheres of student and environment. In short, an individual 'set' of circumstances stems from students' biographical background characteristics (which I term sociological) as well as their psychological attributes. The persistence process is further mediated through students' interactions and experiences within the external environments of the course and wider HEI. Therefore both quantitative and qualitative analysis focused on both internal (e.g. age, goals, motivations) and external factors (e.g. tutors, feedback, friends) which participants referred to. The descriptive interacting spheres (shown in **Figure 1**) of Internal (students' Sociological and Psychological) characteristics and External (course and institutional) environments were developed into a coding model that operated across QUAN and QUAL 'waves' of research.

I will later discuss my use of NVivo and the development of coding nodes (e.g. from free nodes to hierarchical tree nodes) and well as the data queries that I ran to further explore potential relationships within the data. However, I as am a photographer and a visual learner, for my own benefit it was also very important to represent the development of these interacting internal/external relationships in visual form. This is shown in **Figure 5** and is best described as a series of 'filters' that the data was put through in an ongoing and iterative way as the research progressed.

My approach to the research as a whole (including both Survey and interview data) involved firstly identifying participants' **Sociological** biographical characteristics (e.g. age, place of residence). I then explored the personal **Psychological** attributes (e.g. goals, levels of self-confidence) that participants referred to. I then examined each response/account for references to **Course** and **Institutional** environments making distinctions between the two in terms of factors that were specific to the immediate BA Photography environment (e.g. curriculum, peers) and those which were more generic in broader institutional terms (e.g. location, 'friends'). These are identified in **Figure 5** by one way arrows (→).

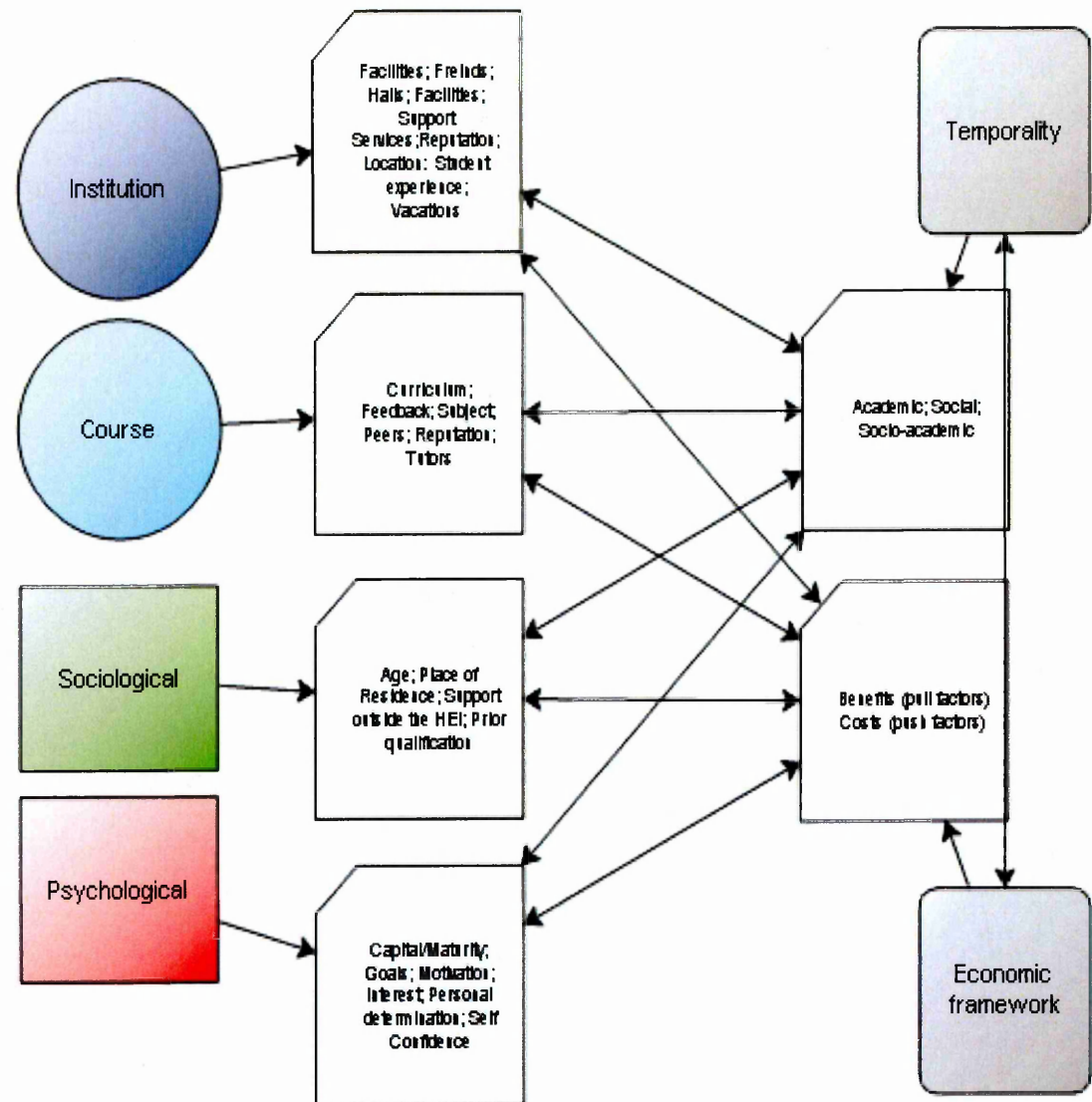
I was particularly interested in the external environments of Course and Institution, as these can be modified (and recommendations made) to improve the student experience and encourage persistence. However, the initial entry characteristics of students' cannot be changed (Kinzie et al, 2008). The Tinto (1993) model denotes these environments as having dual social and academic strands (and participants also referred to their student experience within these contexts). Mackie (2001) also alludes to these different aspects under her 'Social' and 'Organisational' forces. Therefore, a further 'filter' of analysis involved the differentiation between social and academic factors in participants' accounts, as they operated at Course and Institutional level (for example the difference between 'peers' as a social element of the course environment and 'friends' which might imply social ties within the wider HEI). However, I also examined how these interacted with students' own lived contexts, for example, the ways in which biographical factors such as place of residence (Sociological) might

influence the relative value placed (Psychological) on the social and academic spheres of Course and Institution. These reciprocal and interlinked Internal/external interactions are shown by two-way arrows (\leftrightarrow).

Similarly, another 'filter' of analysis investigated students' perceptions of their experience through the lens of an economic framework. This was in response to Braxton (2000) who recommended such an approach, as well as previous studies by Leppel (2001, 2005) and Mackie (2001). Again, the push-pull nature of these relationships is represented by two-way arrows (\leftrightarrow), in that it sought to identify what external features of the Course and Institution acted as push or pull forces, for whom (Sociological), and why (Psychological).

Finally, these interactions were positioned temporally, (also represented by two-way arrows (\leftrightarrow)). This reflects both Tinto's (1993) and Wenger's (2006) longitudinal models of engagement and participation, and early findings had tentatively suggested that participants changed as they moved through Levels of study. I explored this phenomenon in increasing depth as the research progressed, for example, as participants reported changes in the value they placed on the social and academic milieu of the course and institutional environment, increasing self-confidence and feeling of fit as well as shifts in their personal motivations and goals as they related to the subject matter itself (Photography).

Figure 5 Model of coding categories showing how the conceptual framework was used in data analysis



I also applied the overall framework from **Figure 5** to individual students' accounts. Again, this was an attempt on my part to represent my findings in (for me) a more easily accessible visual format, where I could *visually* compare and contrast the accounts of different students. Where available, these models integrated the responses given in the one-to-one interview with any additional QUAN data that the student had provided (e.g. should they also have completed a Survey item). Helpfully, NVivo also has a function that links these accounts to specific (coded) quotes within the interview transcript (though these are not shown here). This approach greatly helped my own reflections on the ongoing research process in a way that purely text-based analysis and NVivo queries would not have done on their own.

The examples included in **Figure 6** ('Frank') and **Figure 7** ('Linda') represent how these visual models of persistence were generated for each interview participant. This was based on their individual accounts, and looked to identify the inter-relationships between the internal and external spheres of my conceptual framework. They represented persistence using an economic framework of push and pull forces, and visually described the ways in which sociological and psychological attributes might interact with course and institutional contexts over time and these might act in similar or dissimilar ways for different individuals.

The approach allowed me to apply to each individual account the primary internal and external 'filters' of **Sociological** and **Psychological**, **Course** and **Institution** that I have discussed with reference to **Figure 5** (→). I could also visually include specific issues within these spheres that were in operation for different students (→) as **push** (positioned on the left) and **pull** (positioned on the right) forces. I could also visually represent reciprocal relationships and temporal issues using two-way arrows (↔), and the most important factors as students progressed into Level 2 represented by a grey arrow (→). For example, 'Frank' reported that a 'pull' factor was his increasing self-confidence (Psychological), which was initially related to his previous FE qualification (Sociological) but also the ongoing feedback from his tutors and peers (a social aspect of the Course environment). 'Linda' also reported a growing self-confidence (and this was a

highly important pull force which encouraged the overall persistence of both students). However, unlike 'Frank' she contextualised this as more related to tutor and familial support rather than peers or 'feedback'. She also reported that this related to her changing goals of more independence (from her home environment) to more instrumental goals within the subject area of photography itself.

However, these visual models were part of a working methodology that aimed to help my own personal thinking and reflection as the research progressed and tentative findings were considered. They are represented here with slightly different layouts due to page and print restrictions. For example, the left-right positioning of push-pull forces is not representative of a continuum of greater or lesser importance for persistence, rather, the factors participants reported were most important were noted in grey arrows (→).

Figure 6 Model of push/pull forces operating at individual student case level: 'Frank'

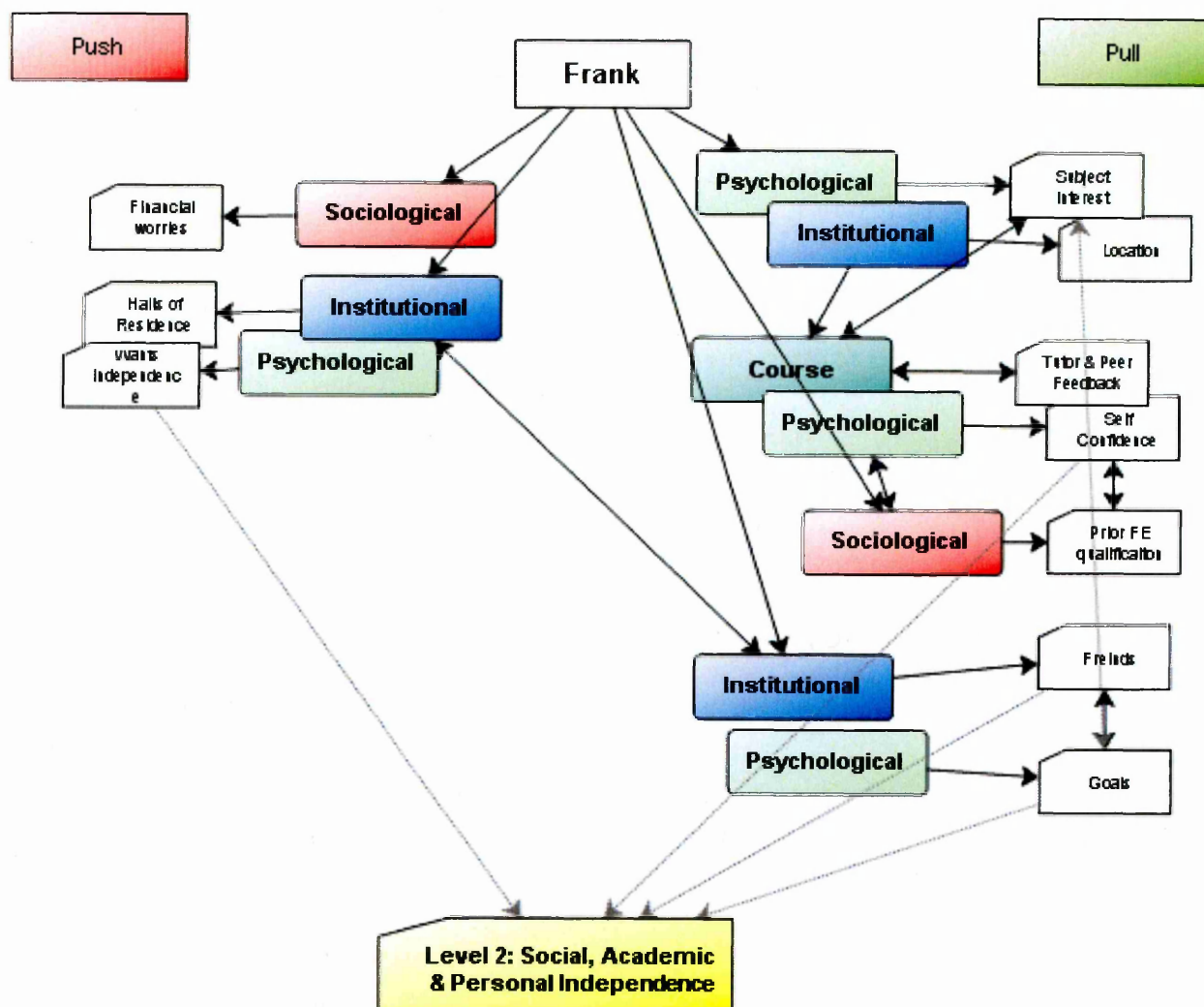
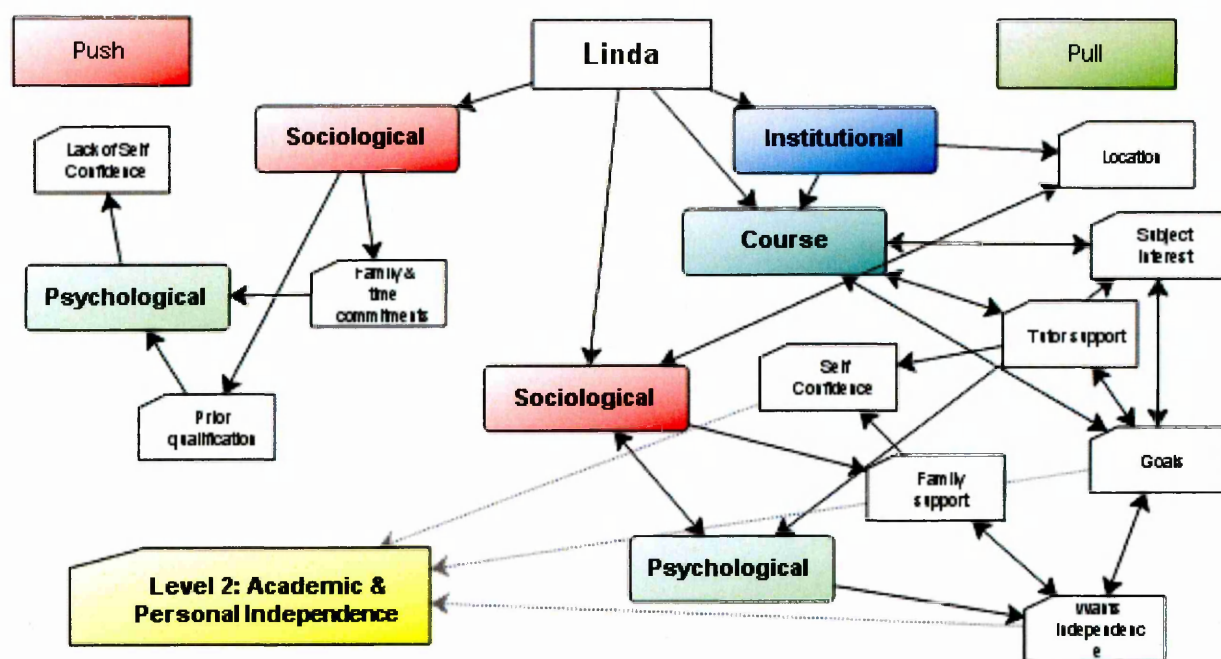


Figure 7 Model of push/pull forces operating at individual student case level:
'Linda'



4.4a Approach to coding & typology development

Overall, the character of my developing coding strategy was both inductive and deductive in nature. Initially, I identified very broad descriptive themes were derived from the literature (e.g. Tinto's 1993 proposal of academic and social influences). These were coded across QUAN and QUAL data sets, (initially across **Surveys 1 and 2, Focus Group 1** and early interviews). This broad 'bucket' coding allowed subsequent analysis for frequency of response in [QUAN] instruments. These in turn informed the development of free nodes in NVivo for [QUAL] interviews and allowed common themes to be tentatively considered overall (Bell, 2005, p.138; Bazeley, 2007, p.67). The research design mainly avoided prescribed lists of responses. A semi-structured approach to both surveys and interviews aimed to inductively gauge potential responses and encourage concepts and themes to emerge from the data itself, rather than overtly imposing my own framework (or the suggestions made in the literature) too early.

The findings from the QUAN elements of data collection (**Surveys 1, 2 and 3**) were inputted into Excel spreadsheets and the QUAL interview transcripts were inputted into NVivo. This was primarily a means of sorting data in different ways as responses were revisited and re-analysed in a circular manner as the research progressed. Like Yorke and Longden's (2007) study, this broad coding was defined primarily from participants' responses (informed by the literature). As this coding developed, it was applied and re-applied across both QUAN and QUAL data sets. Therefore, the QUAN elements of the research design sought initial themes in contextual breadth, (e.g. **Survey 2** invited participants to give their reasons for entering HE/the course). However these issues were further explored in the QUAL element of individual interviews (e.g. offering individual context and depth regarding students goals and motivation). This in turn, informed the re-analysis of the original QUAN data collection instrument.

This cyclical approach also operated in the opposite direction (QUAL-QUAN). For example, one participant in **Focus Group 1** suggested the idea of a temporal student experience and the need to 'separate' from the home community. Therefore a question

regarding students' perception of self-change was introduced in **Survey 3**. This aimed to assess how common this might be across the Level 1 cohort as a whole. It was also an explicit part of my individual interview schedules and aimed to explore any additional contextual forces/relationships that might be at work (at individual level) to encourage 'change'.

Caracelli and Greene (1993) propose that typology development is a major analytic strategy for the integration of quantitative and qualitative data. They define this as:

'The analysis of one data type yields a typology (or set of substantive categories) that is then used as a framework applied in analysing the contrasting data type.'
(Caracelli and Greene, 1993, p.197)

This is appropriate for iterative developmental research designs such as this. It helped develop the internal and external 'spheres' of my conceptual framework that aided the 'inescapably selective' process of sampling and analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.55). For example, broad quantitative surveys such as **Survey 2** (2008) invited participants to provide their Level 1 Residential Status. **Survey 3** asked participants about the type and nature of their previous qualification (as well as how similar it was to their experiences on the BA Photography course). This later informed purposive sampling in individual interviews (Greene et al, 1999, p.260).

Similarly, the same codes were applied across [QUAN] data sets. For example, the coding developed for **Survey 1** (relating to the most important factor students cited as encouraging their persistence) was subsequently used in the analysis of a similar item in **Survey 3** (after the addition of a question relating to this in 2009). They were also used to code responses to same question in [QUAL]-interviews. This process also worked in the opposite direction, for example where interview participants talked at length about the role of the course or personal goals (benefits) in their persistence decisions, this invited subsequent re-analysis and coding of the [QUAN] data.

Bazeley (2007) notes the inconsistent use of the terms 'concept', 'category' and 'theme'. She goes on to define a 'concept' as 'being of a higher order of abstraction than a category'. She also cites Becker and Morse's (2007) definition of a theme as

‘something that is more pervasive than a concept or a category’ something that runs right through the data’ (Bazeley, 2007, p.82). Therefore, to use these definitions, my coding developed as broad concepts (each consisting of categories) and these were applied across both QUAN and QUAL data sets in an iterative manner. These initial codes were descriptive in nature, where certain concepts (each made up of descriptive categories) were assigned to individual participant responses across data sets.

Initially my coding involved only 3 broad concepts: **Academic**, **Social** and **Individual**. These were applied to responses from **Survey 1** and **Focus Group 1** regardless of individual (internal) student identity (e.g. age or prior qualification). Inductively, from examining the data prior to coding, these 3 concepts seemed plausible to me as a starting point. However, they were also inherently informed by the literature, primarily Tinto’s (1993) model of student academic and social integration and by Mackie’s (2001) findings that the individual sphere of her framework was the most important for student persistence. (These preliminary concepts and example responses are shown in **Table 3, Appendix G**) Subsequent descriptive coding took place at individual level. For example students were further categorised as either doubters or non-doubters (in **Survey 1, Survey 3** (2009) and in interviews) This was informed by Christie et al (2004) and Roberts et al (2003) who made distinctions between these two groups of students.

These three initial concepts (Academic, Social and Individual) were then subject to secondary coding (as part of an economic framework) as either ‘push’ factors, (the concept had encouraged the participant to think about leaving), or ‘pull’ factors (the concept had encouraged persistence). Examples of this included:

- **Academic** reasons: (e.g. bored with the course or enjoying the course)
- **Social** reasons: (e.g. struggling to fit in or making new friends)
- **Individual** reasons: (e.g. finance, personal determination, family)

These use slightly different terms to the visual model of overlapping spheres in the conceptual framework (**Figure 1**). Although the sphere of students’ internal characteristics is alluded to in the concept of ‘Individual’, the external institutional environments are collapsed into ‘academic’ and ‘social’ experiences. Although useful for

defining broad areas of the student experience for future interest, coding at this descriptive level was not enough to define the actual relationships between them that might encourage persistence and as the example responses provided in **Table 3 (Appendix G)** demonstrate, it was clear that these concepts overlapped significantly.

Focus Group 1 deliberately aimed to define the ‘student experience’ from a students’ point of view. It was clear that these Level 1, BA Photography participants considered their lives to consist of multiple ‘spheres’ that had influenced their experience. For example:

- Student 3: That whole experience of just being in college. You know, like, everything - the work, the scheduling, the housemates, social life, romance.
- Student 1: Everything is involved
- Student 4: It’s not just stuff about the course.
- Student 3: Yeah, ‘cause when you’re here, I mean, this is your life basically, I mean, you know, family included, but you know, this is your life. So it’s completely different from any other thing that you’re going to do, so...

New coding combinations were developed within the framework on an axis that included all 3 concepts (e.g. Academic, Academic/Social, Academic/Individual). However, this still did not adequately reflect the complexity of student responses. One particular example of the problematic placement of categories was the position of tutors and peers. These are social elements within an academic context and are important elements of an analogy between the course and a ‘community of practice’.

A specific example of this initial difficulty in coding development was in **Survey 1: Question 6 ‘What factors encouraged you to stay?’** (91% of respondents answered this question). All responses to the questionnaire (n=69) were inputted into an Excel spreadsheet. This allowed experimentation and reflection as I could view and sort the data in different ways. A screen-grab of this approach to coding for Question 6 is shown in **Figure 8**. This spreadsheet shows the responses given to each questionnaire item by 39 individual students (of the total of 69 students who completed the questionnaire). The horizontal axis shows the actual questionnaire item and the actual response given, followed by subsequent coding. For example Column R in **Figure 8** shows participants’ verbatim responses to ‘What factors encouraged you to stay?’ and Column X shows

verbatim responses to '*What were the most important of these?*' I subsequently coded these responses using the categories I describe in **Appendix G**, and these were also colour coded to enable me to reflect on the findings visually, as opposed to just using text.

Further coding on the horizontal axis picked out the specific factors that students cited. This culminated in my realisation that many students had cited 'people' in their reasons for persistence (Column AB). This approach utilised a visual approach and the Excel sort function to explore commonalities within responses. I entered '0' into the cell if a participant had not answered the question, or had given a minimal answer (e.g. a single reason in response to a question where others had given multiple reasons).

Figure 8 Screen grab of my use of an Excel spreadsheet to explore and sort Survey 1 questionnaire responses in different ways

What factor?	Persistence	Coding - W	Coding - W	Coding - W	What factor?	Most important
1. What factor?	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
2. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
3. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
4. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
5. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
6. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
7. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
8. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
9. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
10. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
11. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
12. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
13. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
14. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
15. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
16. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
17. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
18. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
19. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
20. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
21. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
22. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
23. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
24. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
25. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
26. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
27. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
28. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
29. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
30. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
31. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
32. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
33. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
34. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
35. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
36. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
37. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
38. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
39. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0
40. I enjoyed the	academic & course	location	0	0	0	0

This process also demonstrated to me the complexity of the persistence process. Like withdrawal, it seemed unlikely that a single reason would be most important (as suggested by Berger and Braxton, 1989). Indeed, some participants explicitly reported this in their **Survey 1** response: *'All of these factors working in synergy are all equally important'*. Participants in **Focus Group 1** (as discussed above) also discussed this plurality and it was a feature of individual interviews:

I'm doing this for a career; it's a professional choice as opposed to a social one. But I think you can't do that without having the back up of your social life, you'd go crazy.
Matt: BA Photography, Level 2

You'd have to be a very special person to come here and have no friends at all and just work your way through flat out. I don't know there are many people like that.
Felicity: BA Photography, Level 1

I will discuss the synergy between academic and social spheres further in the Findings and Discussion section. There was a related difficulty (within my initial coding concepts of Academic, Social and Individual) through an overlap of specific factors such as tutor, location, friends and peers. This particularly involved defining the social and

academic elements that exist within the 'course' (and this includes its relationship with students' inner goals and motivations). My first attempt at re-coding to include relationships between the **Academic**, **Social** and **Individual** concepts, and examples and percentage of response to each is shown in **Table 4 (Appendix G)**.

This was also a way of playing with the data and experimenting with the conceptual framework that underpinned the research. For example, this involved looking specifically at the difficulties in the concept of **Academic** as a theme. I initially re-conceptualised this as **Subject** to include the difficult placement of the tutor (as the immediate 'face' of the institution) and the peer group (who were formerly defined within **Social**), 'Support', was equally difficult to define, particularly when respondents did not indicate from whom it was received. This could potentially link to the atmosphere of the course, as well as internal factors such as individual students' openness to seek support.

A further stage of coding also showed that the questionnaire design and layout did not encourage student to rank these items. It again suggested that it was difficult for participants to identify one singular factor that had encouraged them to persist. **Survey 1, Question 7: What was the most important of these?** [factors that encouraged persistence] had a lower response rate of 78% (n=54). A three-point ranking design was subsequently used in **Survey 2**. A new framework was imposed on Question 7 coding, with particular emphasis on the role of the course (as subject) in **Table 5, Appendix G**.

Finally, **Survey 1** was revisited (from the coding of **Focus Group 1**, which aimed to explore different spheres of institutional experience). Distinctions were made between course specific and generic institutional factors. Ultimately, this was reflected in the development of the 'external' spheres of my conceptual framework. These codes were applied to **Survey 1 and Survey 2** responses and the model meant that this could also be applied across data sets. For example, the same distinctions were subsequently made in **Survey 3** and in individual interviews.

Responses to **Survey 2** helped to further my coding strategy to define different facets of the external spheres of Course and Institution, whilst still keeping Tinto's

(1993) concepts of academic and social milieu within this external sphere.

Approximately half of responses (52%) to an item in **Survey 1** (about the reasons for persistence) had been coded at Academic/Social level (as shown in **Table 4, Appendix G**). The application of these distinctions to the coding strategy to pre-entry questionnaires **Survey 2** is shown in **Table 6, Appendix G**)

4.4b Examining the data by theme and individual cross case analysis

Transcriptions of the QUAL data were imported into NVivo data analysis software. Initially, free coding nodes were set up to reflect the early themes of Academic, Social and Individual. As the QUAN data (in Excel) had been subject to the same descriptive concepts, this was an early means to compare and integrate the quantitative and qualitative data. However, at this stage I felt I was being overtly led by the dual academic and social spheres of Tinto's (1993) model and Mackie's (2001) proposal that the main enablers (or pull factors) lay in the individual sphere of her framework.

Subsequently, these were modified to distinguish between social and academic elements of the course and institution (thus beginning to make the important distinction between individual interactions at these two levels. It was hoped that this distinction would subsequently help identify specific areas for good practice to support persistence. The importance of 'people', particularly friends, tutors and peers, was a key finding of the early QUAN-QUAL research (which I will expand on in the Findings and Discussion section), as were students' personal goals. Therefore 'people' and 'goals' were also introduced as free nodes. Additional free nodes relating to students' doubting/non-doubting and a temporal student experience were also included in the qualitative data analysis.

However, at this stage it became clear that the 'situated' nature of these factors and the relationships and crossovers between spheres were not integrated enough. Many of the key researchers I had drawn on, e.g. Tinto (1993), Christie et al (2003), Roberts et al (2004), Mackie (2001), had investigated the interaction of individual students with institutional environment. This suggested to me that there were

interplays between these contexts, both internal to individual students (biographical and psychological) and factors that were external (operating at course level and institution level).

Therefore, these free nodes were re-organised to reflect the developing conceptual framework (**Figure 1**) as tree nodes of Internal Student Forces: Sociological and Psychological spheres, and External Environmental Forces: Course and Institution. Secondary tree nodes reflected the Economic Cost/Benefit decisions students made (doubting/non-doubting, push and pull factors) and a Temporal student experience in academic, social and socio-academic terms (**Figure 5**). One of the benefits of using NVivo was that data could be multi-coded and retrieved at any of these levels. This aided investigation of the relationships between these thematic variables (and the individual sociological characteristics recorded at individual student case level I will discuss next).

All existing qualitative transcriptions were subsequently re-coded, as a top down approach starting with the top tree node of **Sociological, Psychological, Institutional, Course, Economic** and **Temporal**. They were then re-coded again into nested nodes (e.g. prior qualification, age, confidence, goals, location, Halls of Residence, tutor, feedback), and then again into second level smaller nodes for example:

- **Sociological > Age > Mature > 21-30**
- **Sociological > Place of Residence > Commuter**
- **Psychological > Goals > Instrumental > Career related > Photographer**
- **Institutional > Location > Owns a car**
- **Course > Curriculum > Level 1 > Structure**

This iterative analysis and constant comparison and cross checking went on throughout this research and across QUAL-QUAN data sets, with early findings suggesting that the most common top level nodes were **Psychological**, followed by **Course**.

I invited my institutional Research Fellow to re-code sections of both the qualitative and quantitative data as a means of 'checking' this coding strategy. Although she does not know these research participants, these excerpts were anonymised and

edited to reduce identifiable contextual features. Our coding using these categories was reasonably similar. However, one development that resulted from this process was that a distinction was made between 'goals' and 'motivation' in the psychological sphere. 'Goals' were defined as something that the interview participant wanted, whilst 'motivation' was identified (and further defined at secondary level) as either an internal behaviour that the participant utilized, or an external context that encouraged motivation.

All individuals who took part in [QUAL] interviews and focus groups were assigned attributes at individual case node relating to Level of Study, prior qualification, Level 1 residential status and age. As I discussed previously, these biographical and 'factual' attributes are very easily objectively identified, and were also the major features of my sampling strategy in the sociological 'sphere' of my conceptual framework.

However, goal orientation within HE (as certification or cognitive, in Stage's (1989) terms, status as a doubter or a non-doubter and self-confidence levels at time of interview (as low, medium or high) were also assigned to each individual participant. This aimed to represent the psychological aspects of internal student characteristics. Subsequent cross case analysis using NVivo matrix coding queries allowed analysis of the relationships between these variables. It also allowed comparisons to be made with the external contexts and themes previously discussed as well as the specific contexts (transcription) in which these comments/perceptions took place. Examples of these matrix queries related to prior qualification, age and levels of capital as well as goals, reasons for attending HE and age at entry.

4.5 Potential critique & limitations of the study

4.5a Overview & reflections on the research process

This study has utilised a mixed methods approach to understanding the persistence of a relatively small group of BA Photography students at a small, rural and specialist ADM institution. The research could be criticised on the grounds that it is perhaps too dependent on existing literature, and therefore offers little in terms of new

knowledge as the reasons for student withdrawal and factors relating to the student experience (in the UK) are fairly well established (e.g. Yorke and Longden, 2008). A similar critique could be levied in terms of my use of the literature and persistence studies undertaken in different educational contexts (e.g. American and Australian HE systems) and their application to a UK, art design and media institution.

However, I would respond to this that the integration of a multiplicity of theories from the literature within the research design (e.g. a theory elaboration approach that includes both sociological and psychological models and the exploration of students economic decisions based on perceptions of gain) gives my study a broader understanding of my own students' experience. An important aim of this study was to improve the experience of my own BA Photography students. Tinto (1993) and Johnstone (1997) propose that educational contexts differ, so it was vital to fully understand the experience as it is lived in my own HEI as a basis for improved practice as well as future research within my own educational photographic context.

The mixed method approach allowed me to identify (e.g. using larger quantitative surveys) broad themes that I could also locate within this literature. I believe that these factors would not have been identifiable by small-scale interviews alone (e.g. the importance of 'people' in the persistence process). However, this resulted in an overwhelming amount of data collected, some of which was not used in the final analysis. This has implications for the use of such approaches in terms of questionnaire design and focus and participants' time spent completing overlong data-collection instruments. That said, as a result of these preliminary and tentative Surveys, the small-scale follow up interviews were successfully focused and managed to unpick the themes as they related to the circumstances and characteristics of individual students. This approach allowed me to identify differences between students that I discuss in the Findings section (e.g. as a result of maturity or prior qualification). This again contributes to a more targeted strategy to better support students from different backgrounds.

Additionally, as I have discussed (and as demonstrated by **Table 2** and the figures included in **Appendix C and J**), the student demographic of each BA Photography cohort changes yearly. It may have been more appropriate for this research to 'track' a single cohort of students throughout their undergraduate experience. However, the study still explores persistence as it relates to different Levels of study (as recommended by Sparrow et al, 2008 and Robinson et al, 2004). I will now discuss specific issues within the research design that should be considered in any future research designs, namely the generalisation of such small-scale case study research and issues relating to insider studies.

4.5b Generalising case study research

Potential criticisms also concern the generalisation and representativeness of these findings within the wider HE sector. Yin (2003) proposes that case studies are 'generalisable to theoretical propositions, not populations or universes' (Yin, 2003, p.10). Politically, retention issues are of interest to many institutions, and student persistence has not been explicitly explored in an art and design context. However, as a descriptive case study, rooted in practice, my research is deliberately transparent to encourage more 'fuzzy' generalisations (Bassey in Bell, 2005, p.12).

Titus (2004) argues that single institution studies are limited in this respect, whilst Allen (1999) argues that internal validity is stronger in a single institutional study. This problem of representativeness and the critique of the single case study has been an important consideration in the development of the 'spheres' of my conceptual framework. This was particularly in regard to identifying the potential interactions between (internal) individual dimensions and wider external contextual (institutional) as well as narrower (course) environments.

These interactions link more homogenous student experiences within the wider HE sector (e.g. living in Halls of Residence) as well as institutionally specific features that only some other HEI's might share (e.g. rural location). Williams and Luo (2010) cite rural location as a limitation their study but I would argue that studies based in rural HEI's are uncommon within the literature and therefore such a 'case' adds to existing

knowledge. Finally, specific on-course experiences (e.g. the role of peers, tutors, subject, curriculum, and the nature of photography itself) offer both contextually specific (art, design and media) contexts as well as generic ones that the wider HE sector may learn from. They are of interest as potential factors that other institutions may wish to research/explore within their own contexts, particularly in the light of Tinto's (2009a; 2009b) current interest in the role of the course as encouraging persistence. Many of his recommendations (e.g. learning communities) appear to be endemic to art and design contexts. However, it must be recognised that:

'Variation across institutions and different subject areas makes it difficult to generalise across the sector as a whole.'
(McGivney, 2004, p.34)

Because institutions and courses differ, it is not my sole aim to generate knowledge but also to encourage critical reflection and discussion. My focus on BA Photography students firstly (as smaller scale) allows investigation of role of background characteristics and sociological identity (e.g. Yorke and Longden, 2008). However, the deep focus also enables exploration of students' personal psychological perceptions, goals and perceptions of benefit (e.g. Leppel, 2001). Currently, this approach is not reflected in the literature, yet is explicitly recommended by Braxton (2000). Roberts et al (2003) deem studies that include these factors as:

'...valuable, because they do not focus on the 'at risk' characteristics delineated by much attrition research, but on other individual student attributes, which institutional strategies can help maintain.'
(Roberts et al, 2003, p.3)

Second, as a situated study, it recognises and transparently explores students' on-course experiences as they occur, as potential mediators of persistence behaviour. Both the literature and my initial research findings suggest this is an important consideration. Schofield (in Gomm et al, 2000) argues that investigating the typical, common, or ordinary can increase generalisation, and that this approach is more appropriate than studies based on convenience. My research could be critiqued on this basis as my primary sample is my own undergraduate Photography students. However, I would argue that the nature of photographic education is optimally relatable to

different subject contexts both within the art and design sector and beyond. The mechanical nature of photography has broad cultural currency, and is not as elite (in socio-cultural terms) as other forms of art such as painting or sculpture. Additionally, in both institutional and sector terms, the course attracts high numbers of 'non-traditional' students. Photographic education also spans profession and non-profession based orientations (Leppel, 2001; Newbury 1997a) whilst maintaining the theory/practice divide that is common in art and design subjects (Grove-White, 2003). Finally, the pseudo-studio environment of the darkroom provides another 'middle-ground' between the student mobility of lecture based learning (e.g. Media, traditional institutions) and the static and permanent peer workspace provided by the studio (e.g. Art and Design).

4.5c Researcher as 'insider'

I have dual institutional roles. First I am a Level 1 tutor on BA Photography course, but I am also one of a team of four 'Educational Development' lecturers located in the Learning and Teaching Department (responsible for institutional retention). Alongside my (doctoral) researcher role, this places me as a member and non-member of the wider institutional community along an 'insider continuum' (Hellawell, 2006). However, these contextual relationships naturally shift over time and are fluid as they may be made or broken. Some personal thoughts regarding different contextual constructions of my institutional role are provided in **Table 7: Appendix K**, although the tabular format implies a dichotomous approach, rather than a continuum.

There several benefits and pitfalls to this. First, insider status (within case study research in particular) has been criticised for its narrow focus (Merton in Hellawell, 2006, p.484). However, I would argue the descriptive nature of the case study lends itself to transparency (Guba and Lincoln in Schofield, p.74) and an 'insider' researcher I have an inherent understanding of my own teaching context which encourages transparency and reflexivity. The interventionist nature of practical recommendations also lends itself to overcoming this (Coghlan, 2007, p.296).

Second, I can capitalise on my researcher insider status (Bird, 1992). For example it gives me access to internal statistics (e.g. Annual Monitoring Statements) and

institutional resources (e.g. **Survey 2** postage costs). It can inform practical changes to improve the student experience within my own teaching context (Stenhouse, 1975). The aim to improve institutional practices is reflected in my research questions. Through comparative analysis between courses at my institution, I can identify local, pedagogic course factors that influence student persistence decisions, as well as interaction with wider institutional environment factors (e.g. location, campus atmosphere).

Nisbet and Watts (1984) highlight the importance of transparency of application of research results/findings (in Cohen et al 2005, p.184). In terms of modified pedagogic practice, for example the improvement/development of essay feedback mechanisms that I include in **Appendix L**. As 'insider' research I can make changes to the 'case' of my own teaching context and reflect on students' feedback, as they occur (e.g. student course evaluation mechanisms, **Survey 4: Appendix H**). This potentially increases generalisation and relevance through disseminating the practical application of these initiatives.

Third, issues of authenticity of response and notions of Cartesian divides can be diminished in insider research contexts. As a tutor, I have always actively and publicly disclosed my view of teaching/learning as a partnership (Shor in Gitlin et al, 1989, p.205). Knowledge is naturally built up as part of a collective community as discussed by Gitlin et al, (1989, p.202). This is further contextualised within the community of practice model proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991). As I encourage contrasting views as the nature of art and photography, my own students' subjective testimonies may be more authentic. As 'insider', my own students are accustomed to my encouragement of debate and acceptance of personal and differing viewpoints. Subsequently, this student sample may be less likely to collude with me in a researcher role or alter their accounts due to implicit power relations relating to my insider role as their tutor (Gitlin et al, 1989, p.206).

Student perceptions of 'benefit' have implications for authenticity of participant accounts (Bloor, 2004, p.321). BA Photography students made comments such as *'It's good that we're helping you out with your work as well, 'cos you've helped us out with*

ours' and *'I'm very happy to be here and just help out in general. And, you know, just provide a helpful insight into the world of students,'* This suggested that students felt more inclined to 'help' due to my insider status, perceived integrity and when they saw an agenda of improved practice through informed voluntary consent (Dockrell, 1988). Students appeared to welcome having their voices heard.

4.5d Ethics & 'insider' research

The British Sociological Association (BSA) explicitly recommends that:

'[Researchers] should be clear about the limits of their detachment from and involvement in their areas of study.'
(BSA, 2002, p.2)

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) also specifically address the potential risks of insider research as:

'[In] the case of the dual role of teacher and researcher and the impact on students and colleagues, dual roles may also introduce explicit tensions in areas such as confidentiality and must be addressed accordingly.'
(BERA, 2004, p.6)

Therefore my insider researcher status has implications and risks for research integrity. Any mistakes (e.g. breaches of confidentiality, students' potential perceptions of coercion and power imbalances) could ultimately cross over into my teaching role.

They therefore have professional implications outside the bounds of this research itself.

The BSA (2002) continue:

'Because sociologists study the relatively powerless as well as those more powerful than themselves, research relationships are frequently characterised by disparities of power and status. Despite this, research relationships should be characterised, whenever possible, by trust and integrity'

Mirroring this, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (2002) define potentially vulnerable groups (of human research participants) as including:

'Children and young people, those with a learning disability or cognitive impairment' [but most importantly in my research context, they also include] 'individuals in a dependent or unequal relationship.'
(ESRC, 2010, p. 8)

Therefore, voluntary informed consent (**Appendix I**) and a collaborative approach was an important consideration in this research (Bell, 2005, p.53). Personally, I

take the stance that 'the teacher/researcher's primary responsibility is to their students. They are teachers first' (Mohr in Halasa, 2002, p.3). I am unsure if implicit power relations can ever be fully overcome. Therefore despite the potential difficulty of conflicting interests, (as argued by Gitlin et al, 1989, p.197-202) my professional role as tutor comes before my research. I would adopt a risk management strategy of stepping out of the researcher role and guiding the student should they report they are having difficulties, thinking of leaving the course or show any signs of 'emotional harm' (BERA, 2004, p.8).

I also put my responsibility for students pastoral care first, via a sampling strategy which avoided in-depth (interview) research with any students who I was aware was experiencing serious difficulties of any sort. Similarly, though I have access to individual student records as part of my professional role, I considered it covert research to use these records without participants' prior consent. Therefore all surveys/interviews invited students to provide biographical data (such as age, residential status and prior qualification) voluntarily. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and institutional Annual Monitoring Statements (AMS) are already in the public domain. Whilst they provide broad context for my research, they do not identify individual research participants (ESRC, 2010, p.10).

Dockrell (1998) suggests teacher/insider research can place students in an ethically stressful situation, (e.g. a misconception of differences between the purposes of research and assessment) and students may change their behaviour or responses (Dockrell, 1998, p.63-4). The BSA (2002) warn that:

'Even if not harmed, those studied may feel wronged by aspects of the research process. This can be particularly so if they perceive apparent intrusions into their private and personal worlds, or where research gives rise to false hopes, uncalled for self-knowledge, or unnecessary anxiety.' (BSA, 2002, p.4)

Voluntary participation and informed consent minimises this risk of exploitation and vulnerability (Humphries, 1997, p.6). The BSA (2002) go on to recommend that:

'It may be necessary for the obtaining of consent to be regarded, not as a once-and-for-all prior event, but as a process, subject to renegotiation over time. In addition, particular care may need to be taken during periods of prolonged fieldwork where it is easy for research participants to forget that they are being studied'

(BSA, 2002, p.4)

I have regularly re-defined confidentiality and anonymity with BA Photography interview participants, as this research progressed. This included seeking individual permission for use of specific quotes in the final thesis, as I realized that potential publication gives the opportunity for a wider audience than I had originally anticipated or agreed with participants. Also the use of some of these quotes could potentially breach my original promises of confidentiality and anonymity (BERA, 2004, p. 9; BSA, 2002, p.5). This is particularly important in my case study research context as sample sizes are small and interview participants have distinctive (potentially identifiable) characteristics (ESRC, 2010, p.28). All interview participants were allocated a pseudonym and provided with transcripts of their interviews and given the opportunity to make changes, give further comment and withdraw statements (BSA, 2002, p.3, p.5). All data gathered was then stored electronically in password-protected files (and original audio recordings/paper responses were destroyed).

Another important ethical consideration was the appropriateness of the timing of my data collection in the context of the student lifecycle and students' workloads (BERA, 2004, p.8) (e.g. around assessment points as **Survey 3** was delivered after formative assessment had taken place). Pre-entry contact with my own students was another consideration (e.g. **Survey 2**). As a trusting 'insider' relationship had not built up, I considered that this (potentially) constituted a vulnerable situation for new BA Photography students, where power relations may replace true voluntary consent. Therefore in 2008 and 2009, **Survey 2** was only delivered (via personal email) after a prolonged period (2-3 months) of summer email contact between incoming Level 1 students and myself.

5 Findings & Discussion

5.1 Introduction: Why do BA Photography students persist in their studies?

'I think it's [persistence] a very personal, individual thing, I think it depends definitely on who you are, and why you're here.'

John: Level 3

This case study aimed to explore the reasons for student persistence on an undergraduate Photography course at a small, rural and specialized (art, design and media) institution. It intended to identify the forces and interactions at work that helped individual students overcome the challenges which all undergraduates encounter in order to generate recommendations for practice. As I have discussed, this is a mixed method study. It is organized around the themes raised in the literature, for example, Tinto's (1993) dual strands of social and academic integration, a temporal student experience (e.g. Wenger, 2000; Tinto (1988) and the individual and institutional features which might act as push or pull forces (e.g. Mackie, 2001) and therefore influence departure/persistence decisions.

However, as the research has progressed it has also been modified by ongoing findings and my own professional observations. The initial conceptual framework (**Figure 1**) located the sites of these interactions within and between four 'spheres'. Two of these are internal to individual students (in terms of lived contexts (**Sociological**) and personal goals and characteristics (**Psychological**). The other two spheres of influence are external at the level of the broad **Institutional** environment (e.g. location) and the specific undergraduate **Course**.

However, as the research progressed my conceptualisation of the framework shifted, as it became apparent that it was the *interactions* between the internal/external spheres that were the most important for persistence. The four spheres in **Figure 1** denote only areas that *could* influence persistence decisions. However, this initial diagram was derived from a literature that is diverse in its approaches and conceptual frameworks. It was primarily a means of integrating these positions and as a result it

might also imply a relatively homogenous and static student experience based solely on four factors. It became increasingly clear that it was the spaces where the spheres *overlap* which were more pertinent, and so these findings are organised around these interactions.

However, my analysis of the data also suggested that these internal/external interactions were different for students from different personal backgrounds (Sociological) and with different personal characteristics (Psychological). I have therefore also organised my findings to reflect these differences in order to generate recommendations that are appropriate to support a diverse student body. Even these interactions changed over time as students progressed through Levels of study. Once again, I have included some reflections on this temporal dimension of the student experience.

The external spheres of the university (and course) environment can change, while the initial entry characteristics (both sociological and psychological) of students cannot (Kinzie et al, 2008, p.23). Therefore I will present and discuss these findings primarily through the lens of the external spheres of Course and Institution that I identify in **Figure 1**. These can be modified, and recommendations for practice more easily made. At a secondary level, I will organise this discussion of the external environment around the intersection of Social and Academic experiences, which again appeared to operate (or interact) with students' internal characteristics in slightly different ways.

Therefore these findings are structured in relation to my secondary research questions of:

- **What forces are at work to encourage student persistence despite challenge?**
- **How do these forces interact to encourage persistence decisions?**
- **What are the implications for practice?**

The tentative findings from early (Year 1) research have been integrated into the study as a whole, though I will acknowledge where these early suggestions shaped further analysis and exploration. First, I will discuss the nature of the challenges which

students' perceive they face (e.g. the scale and nature of student doubting and subsequent persistence) as well as the forces which they report help them overcome these.

Using this as a starting point, I will then move on to introduce the temporal and shifting nature of student progression through 3 Levels of undergraduate study, where the reasons for persistence might change. I will examine the duality of the social and academic external environments that students inhabit. I will structure my subsequent discussion of the complex interplay between student/environment, internal/external interactions around these (1) Social and (2) Academic aspects of the external institutional domain. I conclude with recommendations that could constitute suggestions for good practice in other educational and research contexts.

5.2 Overcoming Challenge: Level 1 doubting & the reasons for persistence

In terms of my research questions, it was important to first explore the scale and nature of Level 1 student 'doubting'. The Literature Review discusses the reasons for student withdrawal (e.g. Yorke and Longden, 2008). I was interested to contextually investigate the 'pull' forces that students reported had encouraged them to overcome and cope with these challenges. These push/pull forces were captured using both QUAN (Survey 1 in 2007 and Survey 3 in 2009) as well as QUAL (Focus group 1 and individual interviews) data collection instruments.

Survey 1 (Appendix D) was delivered to Level 1 student mentors from all 13 undergraduate courses at my HEI. 33% of respondents (n=23) reported that they had considered withdrawal ('doubters'). The remaining 66% had not considered leaving ('non-doubters'). However, this was disproportionately spread across undergraduate courses, (Figure 19, Appendix M) implying that different experiences at course level should be an important consideration in examining persistence decisions. However, at broad institutional level, all of these participants would have experienced more similar generic environments (e.g. rural location or Halls of Residence, should they have chosen to live there). These figures are aggregated by Course and Subject area in Figure 20

(Appendix M). Overall, the majority of early doubters cited academic/course related reasons had acted as 'push' forces in the 1st term, highlighting the importance of individual/course interactions. These responses in **Survey 1** included comments such as:

Because I was finding the course hard to settle into. Learning new ways to approach my work and the general broadness of the timetable was daunting and definitely a learning curve
(BA Fine Art)

I had a dire grade in my essay and I thought I wasn't good enough
(BA Film Studies)

That until my assessment, I felt that I lacked talent
(BA Photography)

These issues were followed by social problems such as homesickness, feelings of isolation (often also related to institutional location) or not making friends (e.g. '*just home-sickness*', '*Feeling friendless*', '*difficulty adjusting*', '*the difficulty fitting in and feeling isolated*'). This suggested to me that the dual academic and social strands of Tinto's (1993) model were in operation in my own research context. The reasons for doubting somewhat mirrored Yorke's (2001, 2008a) synopsis regarding student withdrawal. Broadly speaking, the challenges that persisting Level 1 (**Survey 1**) respondents reported they had encountered fell into 3 main areas:

- **Academic reasons:** 70% of doubters (e.g. negative assessment experiences, bored, struggling with the course, concern regarding the course providing employment pathways)
- **Social reasons:** 17% of doubters (e.g. homesickness, depression, feeling isolated)
- **Financial reasons:** 13% of doubters

However, amongst BA Photography doubters, only 1 respondent alluded to the idea of 'wrong course'. He related this to his professional career goals and preparation for employment:

I thought there might be a course giving me more relevant skills for a future job
(BA Photography student doubter: **Survey 1**)

Given the nature of photography in spanning academic/vocational divides, it was important to investigate interactions between students' long term goals in relation to their perceptions of the course environment.

Findings from **Survey 1** therefore suggested that it was most appropriate to study persistence decisions at course level, and the sample narrowed to BA

Photography only. **Survey 3 (Appendix F)** was delivered to Level 1 BA Photography students with a response rate of 81% (n=55) of those present in class. At this February (2009) mid year point, 42% (n=23) of respondents reported had doubted (**Figure 21: Appendix M**). However, in **Survey 1** (delivered in June 2007 at the end of Level 1) 43% (n=6) of BA Photography student mentors had reported they had doubted (**Figure 19: Appendix M**). However, I suspect that doubting is actually more common than only 42% (**Survey 3**). The earlier delivery of this instrument did not account for doubting within the 2nd semester. Also, its delivery in class time meant that students who were absent (potentially more likely to be doubters) were not present and so did not complete the voluntary questionnaire.

Survey 1 had suggested doubting was most common in the first 15 weeks of study. This is a period when students' links to the institution are weakest (Johnston, 1997). It suggests that the relationship between students and the institution was temporal in nature and that potentially, engagement with institutional environments (and subsequent disposition to persist) increases over time:

It sort of took me the 1st two terms, I feel, to build up the confidence and self-assurance to actually just be able to talk to people and not really worry about it.

Richard

(BA Photography student mentor: Focus Group 1)

This sense of 'adjustment' may also account for higher levels of Level 1 withdrawal. This again implies a temporality to the student experience and includes the role of institutional interventions:

I think going into the 2nd year there is that less worry 'cos you know everyone already and I had loads of financial problems but I know now, after the 1st year that you can have help with that from the college. So that is one less thing to have to worry about.

Andrew

(BA Photography student mentor; Focus Group 1)

Overall, **Survey 1** suggested that the external factors of 'the course', followed by 'friends' were the most frequently cited pull forces for both doubters and non-doubters. However, a distinction was not made whether these 'friends' were course peers, other students within the HEI generally or friends from outside the institution (**Figures 22 and 23: Appendix M**). In **Survey 3** 'the course' was again the most frequently cited sphere of

influence, with 48% citing this as a factor encouraging persistence (**Figure 18: Appendix M**). These findings suggest synergy with Tinto's (1993) academic and social spheres. It is supported by the commonality between the responses given by students from different courses in **Survey 1**, with those given in **Survey 3** (delivered to a different Level 1 cohort of BA Photography students only). The social and academic strands of 'course' and 'friends' was also recognised in **Focus Group 1**:

I guess it was a mixture between the course and social...because as term went on you had deadlines and you had holidays coming up and you had parties and events socially
Billy
(BA Photography student mentor: Focus Group 1)

However, the factors encouraging persistence cited by BA Photography students in **Survey 3** did not exactly mirror the aggregated (multi course) findings of **Survey 1**. This again suggests that different contextual factors operate at course level. BA Photography students reported that personal enjoyment (of photography and/or the course) had helped both doubters (20%) and non-doubters (44%). This suggests that subject interest and personal goals were being met by the course.

As shown in **Figure 18 (Appendix M)**, 'tutors' were more important for persistence in a specific BA Photography course context (28%). However this was cited more frequently by non-doubters (44%) than by doubters (20%). Perhaps earlier delivery in February meant that students are still dependent on their tutor, as they had also cited 'tutors' as the 'best thing' about their previous course (**Figure 26: Appendix N**). It could also indicate good practices within the course context (e.g. staff availability). However, **Survey 3** doubters referred more to 'friends' (25%) than non-doubters (11%). However, non-doubters referred more to their peers (11%). This tentatively suggests that non-doubters had experienced (or valued) a greater degree of social integration within the boundaries of the course itself, and had achieved a social/academic 'balance'.

These findings suggest external factors located at course level are highly important to Level 1 students generally. This is an important consideration for making practical recommendations to encourage student retention from an institutional perspective. These findings suggested students' persistence decisions related to both

social and academic aspects of the (external) spheres of course and institution. This reflects Tinto's (1993) model of integration and I will now discuss these (and the interactions between them) in more depth.

5.3 The plurality of the student experience: social & academic domains

The Tinto (1993) model identifies twin social and academic strands of the student experience. Persistence is the result of successful integration into both of these systems, although too much integration in one of them is likely to cause problems in the other. My findings also suggested that the external course and institutional environments operated on these levels. Therefore I have organised these findings accordingly as students also explicitly recognised a duality to their experience:

I'm doing this for a career. It's a professional choice as opposed to a social one. But I think you can't do that without having the back up of your social life, you'd go crazy
Matt: Level 2

Some students incorporated both of these into their self-identity as an undergraduate student. However, others constructed them as opposing forces rather than complementary ones. This again hints to Tinto's (1993) proposition that a balance between social and academic integration is important for persistence:

When you think of the uni experience, the stereotypical going out and getting pissed and all that kind of stuff, I mean yeah, you do that, but that's not what you're going to go away with, you're going to go away with a degree and how much you get out of it
Lisa: Level 1

Both Matt and Lisa were clear that the course was the most important factor in their persistence. They equated this with their personal perceptions of gain, of 'getting something out of it' and 'doing really well'. Course focus, a perception of social and academic spheres as dichotomous, and awareness of future benefits were common remarks from mature students or those had undertaken prior FE study. These students appeared to be more achievement orientated (e.g. Brower, 1992) than their younger peers:

I think for a lot of people who come at 18 its all about the university experience of making friends and stuff, whereas that wasn't important really...although it does help, it does make things easier...I was here to learn how to do photography and do a degree, whereas a lot of people weren't really thinking that at all in the first year
Andrew: Level 3

5.3a Interactions: Progression through Levels of study & the changing value of social & academic spheres

Interviews with BA Photography students from all Levels indicated that they placed varying value on social and academic spheres at different times. Most students appeared to shift from an affiliation orientation (early in Level 1) to an achievement one (later into their experience) (Brower, 1992). Participants also referred to 'juggling' these spheres in Level 1:

I think the thing on Level 1 there's loads of things to juggle at the same time that makes it really hard. Because everything's really new, so you're kind of dealing with that, and then you're like 'oh my god I haven't... I need to do my work as well, and I need to meet people, and I get used to where I am.

Hannah: Level 2

I think the social side's most important in the first year, but at the same time it was a bit different for me, because I was thinking 'I'm not here to make friends' but they help, so it was quite difficult because I was trying to juggle both'

Andrew: Level 3

This would perhaps also indicate the importance of the peer group, who were more important to non-doubters in **Survey 3 (Figure 18: Appendix M)**, perhaps as a form of academic socialization and as a strategy to overcome this duality:

I'd say in the first year it was a lot more social, but that wasn't throughout the entire first year, that was at the beginning when you're first meeting people, having a good time, hanging out...whatever it is develops into something less superficial I suppose, a kind of mutual respect where you can also talk to each other academically

Jim: Level 2

The social aspects of 'making friends' appeared more important early in the 1st term and gradually became less important. As Level 1 progressed as 'the course' and 'doing well' were more valued by participants. As part of this, it appeared that successful persistence was mediated by a corresponding integration of social and academic spheres within the course environment, as students combined their academic/photographic goals and social needs.

The relationship between my friends and what I do is they're all the same thing to me. Part of what I'm doing is that I can talk to them about it, that's part of the work, you know, is talking to my friends

Pip: Level 2

I think by the 2nd year you're there to work, and do something, and try to be good at it. You've got the almost healthy kind of peer pressure of wanting to keep up with people, what they're doing, you want to do something better

Matt: Level 2

I'm more friends with all the other people who say they're going to be photographers. We're always the ones who are there at 8pm still, because we all want to do well

Andrew: Level 3

Andrew (a mature student in his 20's with strong career related goals) continued to express his surprise at his friends from the peer group in Level 3:

I never would have thought I'd be friends with who I am now, in the 1st year, at all. I think because we didn't really have that much in common. I think I knew I wanted to be a photographer, but I don't think they did

Andrew: Level 3

These persisting students continued to refer to the social aspects of their learning experience, increasingly more so as they progressed through the 3 Levels of study. Yet again, this implies that persistence is encouraged by successful immersion into the community of practice offered by the course/peer environment. It also suggests that students highly value this socio-academic experience. There is synergy between these accounts and Wenger et al's (2002) statement that such communities:

'...become informally bound by the value that they find in learning together. This value is not merely instrumental for their work. It also accrues in the personal satisfaction of knowing colleagues who understand each other's perspectives and of belonging to an interesting group of people... They may even develop a common sense of identity. They become a community of practice.'

(Wenger et al, 2002, p. 9)

However, to return to the Level 1 experience, it is possible that as the 1st term progresses it becomes increasingly difficult to make new friends from outside course boundaries. This may confound feelings of isolation for early doubters, and therefore make the immediate peer group even more important to encourage social networks being formed:

Fresher's week is the only time you can go up to someone and be like 'What's your name and what do you do?' whereas you wouldn't do that by summer term... it'd be like 'go away'.

Hannah: Level 2

5.3b Interactions: 'I guess that's just part of growing up': Maturity & increasing capital reserves

The literature discusses the role that students' capital reserves play in the persistence process. However, it appears that (particularly for younger students, who are also more socially orientated in early Level 1), this also includes an increasing sense of personal maturity and independence. This change is part of a process of alignment that seems to take place within the peer group as persisting students (from all social backgrounds) to become increasingly focused on socio-academic spheres at course level.

Mature and FE qualified students often identified themselves as different from young, A-Level entrants, who are a minority group in my teaching context. Wenger (2000) notes:

'We define ourselves by what we are not as well as what we are, by the communities we do not belong to as well as the ones we do.'
(Wenger 2000, p.173)

This was often explicitly linked with students' perceptions of the closed (social) community of Halls of Residence:

The mentality I'd have had if I was 18 coming straight from A-Levels, would be, suddenly you're free ...I think there are people who do that, and they're there for that reason, but then there's people who, generally they're there to study, but the pull of that social element sort of overtakes them and that becomes more important...but then you're got to remember these are young people who are just kind of learning about relationships and life have suddenly got freedom so it's a kind of overbearing sort of pull
Alan: Level 2

However, these accounts also imply dimensions of personal maturity. This is related to a social/academic balance and Tinto (1993) warns that if one sphere becomes more important than the other it result in withdrawal:

I think its easy for people who live in Halls to concentrate on that aspect of their life, but not really go any further, because they don't necessarily have the readiness or the opportunities that living away from Halls gives you'
Cathy: Level 1

Age, (and related life skills) seemed to play a role in students' ability to cope academically. Christie et al (2003) propose that non-traditional students 'may possess other characteristics which facilitate persistence' (Roberts et al, 2003, p.8). Whilst

mature students may have had family commitments, they also demonstrated skills that buffered them from challenges e.g. time management (which A-Level (younger) students needed to learn). Linda particularly stressed this:

I had to draw a line where I can work up to a point when they come home. And then I'm not a student, I'm mum. I live by deadlines, my whole life is deadlines, you have kids, you have deadlines, that's it
Linda: Level 2

Survey 3 responses also indicated that time management appeared to be a common problem in Level 1. 30% of those who answered the question (in 2008+2009, n=89), reported this the most difficult thing they had experienced. Responses included *'balancing everything to an even extent I often do more on one thing than another'* and *'you have to be very self disciplined as a lot of the work you need to do off your own back'*. The majority of these comments were made by younger students and students from an A-Level background.

5.4 Social Experiences: the role of 'people' in persistence

As discussed in the Literature Review, both Braxton (2000) and Zepke et al (2006) suggest that the climate of an HEI and a sense of commitment to student welfare helps facilitate social integration and persistence (Braxton and Hirschy, 2004, p.98-99; Zepke et al, 2006, p.587, p.589). My findings mirrored these views. This was also supported by previous studies which found human relationships to be a significant factor in student persistence (e.g. Elkins et al, 2000); Attisani, 1989)

The frequency of responses that referred to the importance of 'people' in the student experience was striking. This appeared across data sets and student samples and the identity of these 'people' included tutors, peers and friends. It also included external relationships such as friends who were non-students (cited more by mature and commuter students) and family. However, these 'people' were primarily from the immediate course environment (as opposed to broader institutional ones). For some participants (especially younger students) this need for interpersonal relationships also related to an inability to 'separate' from past communities, as well as a perceived inability to integrate into new institutional ones:

It's missing home, missing girlfriends or boyfriends, or having difficulty with people around you, it's kind of personal relationships I think, generally I find, as peoples' reasons why they want to go

Chris: Level 2

However, participants' accounts also included recognition of institutional interest in their well-being. Comments such as '*You want to feel that you're being looked after, and not taken for a ride*' could be construed as a form of cost/benefit decision in the context of the financial implications that HE has for students and their families. This can operate at both course and broad institutional levels:

[summer email contact with an academic tutor (me) was]

...helpful because you know that they're connecting with you, you matter, you're not just a number on a page, you're a person going to a new lifestyle, a new opportunity, and they're taking that seriously. You're important'

Laura: Level 1

When I came to view the university on an Open Day it seemed very organized, the facilities were good. Honestly, I went to Open Days in [rival institution], and it was shocking. You'd hear people's opinions of certain places, and have expectations before you go. Then you go there, and the realization of how little they cared about whether you as a person get into that university, or how many numbers they get, is outstanding

Lesley: Level 1

Positive early perceptions can also seemed to encourage subsequent relationships and integration into course communities:

The reason I wanted to work on Open Days and the reason I love to stand up and talk about the course and encourage people to come, is that for me it was the most important part of my application... I want to give something back because of how much was given to me when I was an incoming student. I've never spoken to anyone who felt when they were applying they were just a UCAS number. Everyone's thought there's been some sort of personal investment by the course in them

Cathy: Level 1

I'm so grateful that you guys gave me a chance, because everyone else wasn't believing in me

Loretta: Level 1

At wider institutional level however, it appears that a more proactive approach is required to inform students of additional support services. Andrew only realized the extent of these services at the end of Level 1. However it did make him feel more supported for future years. The higher incidence of Level 1 withdrawal implies that this is when students need these services most and institutions should be alert to integrating and advertising them within course environments. Another participant at the end of

Level 1 expressed regret at not making more these: *'For me, I regret not taking full advantage of all the support the uni has'*.

It appears (at least initially) students look to the smaller environment of the course itself for pastoral care and support. Another (mature) student remarked on her willingness to approach course staff for support. However she again differentiated herself from younger peers:

Maybe from what I notice about the department and the ways things work, I feel I can go and ask and it's not going to be a problem and everyone's totally approachable. I don't know if it would be different for an 18 year old who didn't know how to do it'

Cathy: Level 1

5.4a The role of the tutor

Single institutional research at a London university by McCaffery (in Hands et al, 2008) suggests that contact with one or more trusted individuals within the institution is important to students' feelings of connection. This mirrors the dimensions of 'connection' and 'trust' provided by the framework Lesser and Strock (2002) use in their study of organisational communities of practice. The role of the tutor in students' positive on-course perceptions was a key finding which initially emerged from the pre-entry 'wave' of research (**Survey 2**). Students were asked what the best thing about their previous course was. Clearly, the 'tutor' was by far the most common factor cited. As **Figures 26 and 27 (Appendix N)** demonstrate, this occurred across data sets, and across different undergraduate courses. It was also the most frequent factor cited by three different entering cohorts of Level 1 BA Photography students from 2007-2009.

However, as **Figures 26 and 27 (Appendix N)** also demonstrate, whilst the 'tutor' was the best thing about incoming Level 1 students' prior educational experiences (**Survey 2**), 'friends' were most important to the persistence of existing Level 1 student mentors. This finding was an aggregate of students from all courses at the end of the 1st year in **Survey 1 (Figures 23 and 23: Appendix M)**.

Perhaps this comparison of questions is inappropriate (in that **Survey 2** expressly directed responses towards 'the course' environment). Yet to return to the on-course instrument **Survey 3**, (in which the question specifically related to persistence), findings

suggest that (in a BA Photography context), in February of Level 1 study, 'tutors' remained an important factor (28%). However, 'tutors' were cited more frequently by non-doubters (44%) than doubters (20%) (**Figure 18: Appendix M**).

These timings hint to another aspect of a temporal student experience. As students begin to identify themselves with their subject of study (prior to entry and early in their academic career), they may be more dependent upon (positive) tutor support and feedback, as the 'master'. However, as the confidence and skills of persisting students increases (i.e. through on course experiences), the relationship with the former master changes as they progress through Level 1. Wenger (2000) discusses this early relationship:

'Sometimes we are a newcomer. We join a new community. We are a child who cannot speak yet. Or we are a new employee. We feel like a bumbling idiot among the sages. We want to learn. We want to apprentice ourselves. We want to become one of them. We feel an urgent need to align our experience with the competence 'they' define. Their competence pulls our experience.'

(Wenger, 2000, p.161)

In interviews with Level 2 and 3 BA photography students (carried out between September 2008 and May 2009), participants also commented on this changing relationship. They also noted their increasing personal autonomy and a greater value placed on the peer group (as 'friends'):

We've learnt everything we need to learn, it's more like advice now, rather than being taught
Andrew: Level 3

To me the tutor in the 1st year is really important, because it kind of lets you know where you stand. If the work you're producing is rubbish, you might not know it's rubbish...you might not necessarily know what you're doing wrong...But then in the 2nd year, maybe at the beginning the tutor's still important, in the 2nd year I think your peers start to become more important. While the tutor used to be a reference point, your peers start to become a reference point and it's almost more worthwhile hanging out in the finishing room than going to a tutorial
Jim: Level 2

When you come in you don't know anything, and listening to lecturers you take what you say as gospel
Matt: Level 2

There is an internal dimension to the value that individuals place on such relationships, as well as whether they are perceived to operate at the level of institutional or course communities. However, one interview participant was very sure

his persistence had been the result of his own internal determination and subject interest. Yet it was clear he also highly valued tutor support as an external factor:

Ok the first one [reason for persistence] would be my own personal drive and love of photography, that's the whole personal thing. The second would be the support you have from the tutors, and the availability of tutors

Chris: Level 2

Survey 3 also included items regarding the nature of the challenges Level 1 students had faced and how they had overcome them. The data sets from 2008/9 delivery of the instrument were combined. Of these usable responses (n=89), 30% (n=27) explicitly cited problems with time management: *'Time management of all the projects at once as I struggled to keep on top of it all', 'Balancing everything to an even extent, I often do more on one thing than another'*.

This is important, as students who successfully negotiate their time are more likely to receive positive feedback on their work from staff/peers. This is an additional (tutor related) factor that boosts confidence and subsequent persistence. When asked how these challenges were overcome in **Survey 3**, 28% (n=25) discussed getting 'help' from 'people' (a member of staff). However, 37% (n=33) cited internal factors such as personal study skills as the main reason. This included the internally orientated idea of 'keeping at it' and a personal determination associated with doing the work: *'Realizing that if I don't do the work it won't be worth it', 'Just get on and do it'*.

5.4b Peers promote persistence

The course remains the most important external sphere to encourage persistence. However within this, the peer group gradually becomes more important than tutors, as a social tie that is located within the course itself. This is perhaps included in students' broader definitions of 'the course' environment. BA Photography is a 'whole cohort' learning experience, unlike the fragmented and transitory modular context. Therefore peers are more connected, as well as potentially sharing similar interests and academic goals. Tinto (2000) also takes account of the role of the classroom:

'...the ways we have measured or perhaps mis-measured the concept *academic integration* reflects the fact that most classrooms are not involving and are therefore not a factor in student

persistence. This does not mean that they *could not* play a role in persistence, but rather that they have not typically *not yet* played that role.’
(Tinto, 2000, p.82)

He advises the creation of ‘learning communities’ where students’ co-register for the same modules together as a way of ‘bridging the academic-social divide’ (Tinto, 2000, p.85-87). This structure is already intrinsic to the BA Photography curriculum design. It is recognised as significant by students in relation to their early social integration.

Therefore this would be an important consideration for more traditional subject areas, given also the importance students place on their peer group. Hannah talked previously about the difficulty of ‘juggling’ social and academic commitments in early Level 1.

Meanwhile, Lisa did not live in Halls of Residence and had limited opportunities to meet people. Both discussed the importance of this early group work:

It made it easier in Level 1, we were put into one group for one project, one group for another project and then kept moving around so that kind of almost took one of those things away...just the fact you were meeting new people. You could do your work and meet people at the same time.

Hannah: Level 2

Being put in groups is the most important thing because that’s how you get to meet people. That’s where the layers come into it, you meet someone in the group on your course then you meet their flat-mates who are on different courses – it becomes this layered effect.

Lisa: Level 1

Braxton and Hirschy (2004) discuss the concept of ‘communal potential’ and recognise the potential role of the course social environment in encouraging broader institutional social integration:

‘Students who perceive multiple opportunities to connect with classmates who share their values, beliefs, and attitudes are more likely to make contact with those individuals. Interacting more frequently with peers in the community leads to greater social integration.’

(Braxton and Hirschy, 2004, p.101)

However, this also operates in an academic learning context at the level of the peer community. It was also mirrored in Lesser and Storck’s (2002) findings that:

‘In many of the companies that we examined, the ability of individuals to use other community members as a sounding board was a highly valued feature of community life. In these situations, individuals were willing to share innovative thoughts with those whom they trusted, yet were also able to tap their expertise to refine and explore these new ideas.’

(Lesser and Storck, 2002, p.839)

Peers also mutually create norms and values (e.g. Dörnyei, 1994), which are constructed by students over time. For example, Andrew discussed his friends as being of a similar disposition to him. He perceived that they shared a similar work ethic and photographic goals. Another Level 1 student made a similar remark:

...people make friends and groups form together and everyone's getting into little routines, and you start to establish who's a good worker, who's not
Pip: Level 1

However, Andrew had not always perceived his peers to share his dedication. This again suggests a temporal dimension to this 'communal potential'. As students' progress through a course, the peer group creates these like-minded communities, and although Andrew felt making friends 'made it easier', he had always held strong career related goals. However, other interview participants reported that their aims were socially orientated in early Level 1, and became increasingly more academic as they progressed. This suggests a gradual alignment of students' psychological goals within the course environment.

It is clear that students are aware of social and academic elements to the student experience. However, the relative value placed on these shifts as students progress. Most respondents stated an initial social (affiliation) orientation, which gradually changed as they began to place more value on academic (achievement) factors. This is when the personal gains of study become more apparent and the outbound trajectory of graduation is closer (e.g. Wenger, 2000). Individual goals also become more defined and clarified (a point that I will discuss in further depth later).

That said, it appears for the peer group to operate successfully as a pull force, these shifts should operate across the peer group in tandem. An alignment of goals and motives within the academic course will help students persist, but when these differ (particularly in terms of self-confidence and career related goals) students may experience intellectual or academic isolation and consider withdrawal. These students reported that they went through a process of negative comparison with others:

I think lots of people kind of know what they're doing, they know what they want to do, And I feel a bit like I still don't know what I want. I don't know what I'm good at and what I want to do.
Hannah: Level 2

People ask me "what do you want to be when you finish?" and I really don't know... because I think other people know what they actually want to go into at the end of it. I feel like I haven't even got a style of my own photography. Whereas I feel other people have got their own style and they know what direction they are going in with it.

Annie: Level 2

This lack of confidence seemed to stem from vague post graduation goals. This again points to an alignment of the course and students' goals that manifests itself in the social sphere of the peer community. Therefore a 'push' factor was students' negative perception of themselves in comparison with their Level 2 peers. Most other Level 2 respondents (and Level 3 even more so) had aligned themselves with the majority as they discussed their goals as becoming clearer as they neared graduation. In making an analogy between the peer group and a community of practice, it appeared that some students did not perceive themselves as 'legitimate' within the peer community. It suggests that these can also be 'closed' if students' (such as Hannah and Annie) identify themselves to be 'outsiders' at the structural or relational levels of community. There is clearly a sense of self-identification at work in the persistence process. As Lesser and Storck (2002) suggest:

'One might think of a community of practice as a group of people playing in a field defined by the domain of skills and techniques over which the members of the group interact. Being on the field provides members with a sense of identity—both in the individual sense and in a contextual sense, that is, how the individual relates to the community as a whole.¹ A sense of identity is important because it determines how an individual directs his or her attention.² What one pays attention to is, in turn, a primary factor in learning. Therefore, identity shapes the learning process.'

(Lesser and Storck, 2002, p.831-832)

Therefore this suggests the peer group can encourage persistence. However for those students lacking in confidence or unable to articulate clear goals, it can act as a 'push' when students perceive themselves negatively in comparison. Respondents seemed quite aware of their position within the peer group. Jim (like Andrew) had clear vocational/career related goals and was critical of members of the peer group whom he did not perceive to be as motivated and engaged as himself:

They don't care about the course or what they're doing. I think, you go into a lecture and you can see almost immediately who really wants to know and you see people who are talking

throughout and don't really care. You've got people who are paying attention and trying to interact and gain something from it, and you've got a kind of middle ground.
Jim: Level 2

However, findings from **Survey 3** ('What were you most worried about before you came?') imply students are concerned about their work 'not being good enough'. The responses from 2008 and 2009 delivery were again aggregated into a single data set (n=93). 34% of respondents cited a lack of confidence academically of '*not knowing anything*' and '*not being a good enough photographer*.' However, 13% explicitly constructed their lack of confidence through negative self-comparisons with the peer group, e.g. '*People not liking my work: being worse than everyone else*', '*my standard of photography and how it would compare to other students*'. Other pre-entry worries included making friends and fitting in and written work. However only 4 of these students reported that they still had worries about their work not being good enough in relation to the peer group in February after enrolment, e.g. '*Not really [worried about it any more] its more about how I do rather than how I do compared to others*', '*Doesn't bother me anymore just doing my own thing*'.

Lesser and Storck (2002) propose that:

'Members of a community of practice establish their legitimacy through interaction about their practice.'
(Lesser and Storck, 2002, p.832)

These findings suggest that students are keen to establish their legitimacy within the photographic community of practice provided by the peer cohort. For those who successfully negotiate this and gain access to the community, it acts as a 'pull' force and encourages persistence. However, those who perceive themselves as excluded from this community, (contextualised around individual photographic practice) might have a different socio-academic experience and it might act as a 'push'.

5.4c Interactions: 'Like minded people': supportive relationships & making new friends

Yorke and Longden (2008) found that 'making new friends' was the most frequently cited 'best aspect' of the 1st year experience. This was followed by teaching

(i.e. course) related experiences. Both allude to personal relationships, the former explicitly, the latter, inherently involving the 'tutor' as an individual. They also reflect Tinto's (1993) social (friends) and academic (course) strands. My findings suggested that relationships with 'people' was important to students' persistence, but that it was also mediated by individual circumstances, e.g. some students mentioned their families as being important to their persistence (and often constructed this with regard to the financial implications of withdrawing). Younger students tended to refer to this in a parental context whilst mature students spoke of the support they received from partners:

There's loads of reasons why I wouldn't leave, I spent so long getting here, and I left my last uni. I don't want to be a complete drop out. And financial stuff as well, and with my parents...my dad, I wouldn't even tell him I don't want to go back.

Hannah: Level 2

He's just amazing (husband) he's cut his work hours so much because he has to do all the school pick ups and running around and everything and looking after the house, because I'm just not there. And we've got this cut in wages, and yet he still won't let me give up. Because it's not that I've given up so much to be here, it's that he has as well, and that's keeping me going

Linda: Level 1

Well I could never leave the course even if I wanted to because my mums sponsored me with money for the fees and for her to have paid a ridiculous amount of money for me to drop out is not acceptable, so that's what's kept me in to be honest

Robert: Level 1

Social support can therefore operate at a range of levels. Students can simultaneously be members of different communities and these can be internal and external to the HEI. But institutionally, where and how are these supportive relationships formed?

5.4d Interactions: 'This is going be your life down here, moving on & letting go of things past': Dual socialization & the 'separation' process for residential & commuting students

I position the role of Halls of Residence as encouraging socialization within the generic institutional sphere of my conceptual framework. Residential status was an explicit feature of my sampling strategy. It is of interest to the wider sector as most HEIs offer some form of accommodation in Level 1, and the introduction of top-up fees may encourage more students to live at home during their studies. I will now discuss the

differences in the formation of supportive relationships between participants who lived on campus and those who 'commuted' to the institution (either living in private rented accommodation and/or residing in the family home).

Students who did not reside on campus in Level 1 appeared to have a different relationship with the wider student body. This reflected Halpin's (1990) findings that academic integration was more important to commuter students. It appears that peer friendships from the course environment initially are most important to these 'commuters'. However, those who lived on campus (also often younger) had more immediate access to the wider institutional student body. These residential participants tended to conceptualise the importance of 'friends' within this broader context i.e. at institutional (rather than peer) level:

...being in Halls really helped out the social life 'cos you've just got really good friends at the start and hang out with them all the time
Benjamin: Level 1

It is mainly (but not exclusively) young students who live in Halls of Residence. They also tend to not be ordinarily domiciled within the county. It appeared that this was the main means by which these students made new friends early in Level 1. Potentially these relationships would also be most important for students studying on non-studio (or darkroom) based courses, or who did not have the early group work or 'learning communities' (Tinto, 2009b which the BA Photography course offers. This is an important contextual consideration in generalization these findings to modular contexts. Campus accommodation may also be particularly important for younger students as it may be their first time living away from the supportive relationships of family and friends at home. In Halpin's (199) terms, they may experience a need to form a new community:

Well, for me, living really far away from home and stuff like that, you almost need to have a family down here with your mates
Hannah: Level 2

Draper (2005) critiqued Tinto's (1988) proposal that students need to 'separate' from the home community in order to be incorporated into the new, institutional one. However, this was a key point made by Richard (a participant in Focus Group 1 who had

lived on campus) and this temporality and new connections was subsequently an important element of my analysis. I revisited his account to inform ongoing interviews with both commuter students and those who lived in Halls of Residence:

Coming straight here from living at home, the first time away. But that was the most important thing this first year, I think it's important for people who are just moving out and accepting that this is going to sort of going to be your life down here, and moving on and letting go really of things past

Richard: Level 1

This campus community appears vital. Loretta also explicitly referred to a separation from her former social environment. However she had opted to live on campus despite being 'local' to the county and having close friends/family nearby:

I sound really awful and betraying my friends but the friends I've got here are more important to me. Because they're more like me, we've got more in common, whereas I think we just became friends in school and just stayed friends because it was easy. And I feel really big headed to say it but I feel I've grown up a lot quicker than they have

Loretta: Level 1

However, other individual factors such as age, familial responsibilities, length of journey to the institution and being a 'local' student who is domiciled in the home environment also impacted on the values placed on different forms of support. This included support systems outside of the university:

'Peer' for me is the course, mates are just a bonus, if I didn't have any mates I would still do it. If I didn't have anybody here that I knew, it wouldn't stop me doing it...I'd go home and I've still got mates at home.

Linda: Level 1

I'd go home and I wasn't living with anyone on the course, or anyone from here. So that was quite hard. But then in a way because I was still at home I've still got all my other friends from before

Annie: Level 2

Cathy and Lisa did not live in Halls of Residence but both referred to the community of students who lived on campus as 'different' from them. They perceived residential students as a discreet group of which they were not a part. Both of these participants were interested in socializing, but they indicated that they felt they were more 'open' to meeting new people than the 'closed' community of Halls of Residence:

I think because possibly they're a bit younger, they just perpetuated the way they live in Halls and isolated themselves, but went away thinking they'd had a good time but they hadn't really

met anyone new, even though they'd had the opportunity to meet 20 other people who were part of the course, but because of their living situation they chose just to stay among themselves
Cathy: Level 1

There was a massive divide [at a house party] because they were very welcome, but they chose to divide themselves. So it was very obvious the kind of lifestyle they were living, compared to the way we were living, being able to mingle and interact with different people
Lisa: Level 1

Commuter students perceived this campus community formation as impacting upon peer group relations within the course. Again, they perceived themselves as excluded from this campus community. Given the literature regarding 'non-traditional' students as a minority group within HE, perhaps (in my research context) commuter students (as a minority group) also feel excluded. They do not appear to have the shared values and experiences that students who live in Halls might experience.

However, this also points to a plurality of lived experiences, as both Andrew and Linda were mature students, which is an additional minority identity:

Kind of wish I'd lived in Halls really, but not really... because everyone who lives in Halls instantly is friends; in lectures you find that everyone who lives in halls is sat together and stuff
Andrew: Level 3

They all had their extended Halls mates, their party mates or whatever; it wasn't ever a total Photography group so there's always somebody I wouldn't know. But in the 2nd year it hasn't mattered so much
Linda: Level 2

However, problems within this 'closed' social environment may also be a source of early challenge. Institutions should be alert to (young) students who are less successful in integrating socially and accessing the network of support that Residences can offer. This is particularly salient given participants' remarks that it became increasingly difficult to make new friends as the term progressed. Other internal dispositions (e.g. shyness, and subsequent psychological aspects of self worth, attitude and coping behaviour) also need to be taken into account:

There were so many students that I found it [Halls] quite hard. Cos I am reasonably shy I suppose to begin with but I did make my best friends there.
Ross: Level 1

Commuter students appeared more pro-active in making new friends and they were buffered by the value they placed on the socio-academic environment of the

course. However, I previously discussed a shift within Level 1 from a value placed on social environments to a greater individual awareness of academic goals. It may be that the social milieu offered by Halls of Residence is more important in the 1st term to these mainly younger students:

In the 1st year the 1st term sort of sailed by, and it was socializing with people, and the fact you've kind of got roots here, people you live with in Halls and stuff...Then I suppose just realizing that this was what I wanted to do was photography, so that's what I was there for and I had a definite reason why I was there

Chris: Level 2

However, those who lived in on campus were also more likely to report early tensions between social and academic commitments, particularly when they lived with students from other courses with different assessment points:

It'd pull you in different directions, you'd feel like you were being isolated 'cos you weren't doing the things our housemates were doing, although you'd be living to the expectations of the course

Jane: Level 1

These findings indicate that although early social connections are important to students, for some, early integration into the institutional campus environment is most important in terms of creating social ties and support. Again, there is a sense of temporal alignment at peer group level. As Level 1 progresses the social and academic spheres of the course environment become more important for students who live on campus, whilst it is always important for commuting students.

Loretta's account (who was 'local' but lived on campus), of meeting 'like minded people' is an interesting one, applicable to both commuter and residential students. My HEI is a specialized art, design and media institution, subject areas that significantly overlap. This plausibly includes individual students who have similar interests despite the actual course of study, as another participant commented, *'it seems there's loads of little pockets you could fit into'*.

Therefore, successful negotiation of the community offered by Halls of Residence is a major pathway into the institutional environment, and a primary means by which they become more connected to the institution. This supports Tinto's (1993) findings. One young participant had experienced very early problems socializing in Halls of Residence referred enviously to mature commuter students with families:

Yeah, but they've got roots, something to go home to at the end of it...It's still being in some sort of community, which is important in any aspect of life

Chris: Level 2

However, mature students still appeared to experience some kind of separation or shift as a Level 1 student. Linda (a mature student) reported that:

[the course] it's challenging...its giving me what I wanted, its giving me a life outside the house

Linda: Level 1

A form of separation is still occurring in Linda's 'life outside the house' as her identity expands from being a wife and mother to being a photography student in a separate environment. Linda volunteered to be interviewed again as a Level 2 student, demonstrating what Rendon et al (2000) would term 'healthy individualisation' over time:

I feel less guilt for leaving, not spending as much time at home with the kids. I'm almost like they coped with the 1st year; obviously they're fine I've been through the 1st year and they're not suffering because of that

Linda: Level 2

Constant visits home seemed to be an indicator of detachment from the institution, or might limit young students' separation and transition:

I didn't want to stay at home, even though I get on really well with my parents it was so important to leave... I feel like when I go home I'm regressing

Frank: Level 2

If you're going to come somewhere and study for 3 years you may as well be there for a lot of the time, otherwise there's no point

Jim: Level 2

This is something that HEIs should take into consideration, as institutional vacations also were a common time for doubting as students returned to these environments:

When it came close to actually coming back for 2nd year I was like "oh god do I really want to go back". And then I was fine. And then it came to Xmas and I had a long break again and then it's harder to get back

Annie: Level 2

I think it was because I had no contact with uni

Hannah: Level 2

Roberts et al, (2004) also found that vacations were a vulnerable 'risk period' for students, perhaps this relates to the separation that younger students experience as it encourages students to look backwards.

Students (despite residential status) appeared to enjoy peripheral interactions with students from other art, design and media courses. Wenger (2000) calls this a 'generative tension' (Wenger, 2000, p.168). Whilst Tinto (1993) describes membership of student societies as a form of social integration, it is both my own observation, and was reflected in interviews, that this is not part of the culture of my institution. Perhaps this is because multi-membership of different communities (or friendship groups) can be equally naturally formed with common interests within the overlapping subject areas of art, design and media. This was referred to both socially, in terms of living in private accommodation rather than on campus, and in terms of a gradual alignment of social and academic spheres as students' progress:

The students I live with have the same insight into the way I work, they do their work, but they socialise as well so its not clubbing all the time, its having a meal or something, its more grown up, its less immature, it fits within the whole working environment

Laura: Level 1

I don't see myself doing photography, I see myself doing something that transcends all of these mediums so I'm going to get on really well with (student on another Media course) because we can have a conversation we can both really enjoy. I don't like to think of what I'm doing here as really defined like 'this is work and this is leisure time', it's blurred, every experience I have is going to inform the work I do because it's a creative thing

Frank: Level 2

Wenger (2000) proposes that community 'boundaries' are fluid although the course establishes natural boundaries to which students belong to at an 'engagement' mode. Interview participants referred to their friends on other courses demonstrating a sense of more global (or institutional) belonging at the mode of 'imagination'. However, these were also greatly valued in an academic sense as participants perceived these broader (institutional) communities as additional academic benefits to their photographic practice. It reflects Lesser and Storck's (2002) proposition that:

'New members build legitimacy through participating in learning interactions with other members of the community. The nature of participation must be engaging, although there is clearly room for what is called legitimate peripheral participation. Indeed, peripheral members bringing new ideas can catalyze innovation.'

(Lesser and Storck, 2002, p.832)

Tinto's (2009b) recommendation of creating block enrolment 'learning communities' inherently includes students with similar interests and subject specialism,

yet these are inherently natural to the specialist institutional student community. Potentially, the (art, design, media) area attracts like-minded students, increased potential for students to form relationships and 'belong' at different levels and ways. Wenger (2000) reflects:

'Shared practice by its very nature creates boundaries. Yet...there is something disquieting, humbling at times, yet exciting and attractive about such close encounters with the unknown, with the mystery of 'otherness'; a chance to explore the edge of your competence, learn something entirely new, revisit your little truths, and perhaps expand your horizon.'
(Wenger, 2000, p.167)

Participants living with students from 'traditional' subjects outside this specialism perceived these 'friends' as less 'like-minded' than themselves. Perhaps this is an indicator of the importance being able to access appropriate social communities on campus (Pip) as well as the increasing importance of the peer group (Hannah):

[In Halls] I felt that "I'm almost a foreigner at the wrong uni", and a loss of identity maybe
Pip: Level 1

For me it's my mates on the course, because I live with [non-ADM specialist] people, my mates on the course I can ring up and ask them about work, whereas my housemates only know one side of me, they don't really know what I do at uni. Well they do, but I don't really think they care, and I don't really care what they do either
Hannah: Level 2

I have discussed the role that Halls of Residence may have in helping (particularly younger) students access the social environment of the institution. However this is an environment that by its specialized nature, seems to attract 'like minded' individuals but is viewed as a discreet and exclusive by commuter students, who also appear to be more pro-active in making friends. Again, the role of the course (and peer group) appears to become more important to persistence as students progress, a temporal alignment as younger students who live in Halls of Residence move into private accommodation in 'Level 2 and thus effectively 'become' commuter students:

When you go back home you start relying on your parents again and it's impossible not to do it...I find it so much nicer now to speak to them on the phone and be like maybe I'll come home for 5 days or whatever, maybe they'll come and stay with me down here and I feel like they're my guests now, which is really nice. I think that's just part of growing up
Frank: Level 2

However, as Frank suggests, there are more forces at play in these temporal shifts. Implicit in the 'separation' process that young residential students experience are also

age related concepts of increasing personal maturity and life skills, of being independent and living away from home which also operate in the persistence process.

5.5 Academic Experiences: 'I want to be a photographer'?

5.5a 'A year makes a lot of difference': The role of pre-entry qualifications in the persistence process

It was clear that personal maturity was also related to students' prior educational experiences. This is an intertwined concept that involves the accumulation of capital in the form of life skills, age and the nature of students' prior study:

I didn't feel like I was missing home because I'd already moved out before, [to do a Foundation course] so I didn't have the anxiety

Jen: Level 1

I'd already had to leave school and meet a bunch of new people, and all my friends went away to university, so I lost all my friends then... And obviously I'm just that little bit older, and a year makes a lot of difference doing Foundation

Frank: Level 2

If I'd have come straight form A-Level I'd have been all over the shop

Matt: Level 2

The traditional entry route into the BA Photography course is from National Diploma (ND) or Foundation courses. A-Level students are in the minority and these students commented on their perceptions of the peer group as more advanced or knowledgeable than themselves:

Because they've come from a ND they know it's not so strict, they know how to live with it; National Diploma, Foundation, it's the same atmosphere as here. Whereas I've come from A-Level...you have to learn what it's all about

Tim: Level 1

These suggest that pull forces may be different for A-Level and FE students, both in a personal sense (in that the latter have more experience generally) and academically in terms of commitments to the subject area. However, this also seemed to be age related. FE students and older A-Level students appeared to be more academically orientated, particularly in Level 1. Again, this supports my earlier suggestion that there is a process of alignment at work within the student peer group, as FE and mature entrants could articulate goals more clearly, were more comfortable in the subjective learning environment, and demonstrated a greater awareness of the time they had

taken to make their decision. This suggests again a multiplicity of forces acting temporally within to students' experiences, this extra experience provided FE and mature students with additional 'pulls':

Maybe last year I'd have answered differently, when I first started uni I wasn't fussed about what people thought about my work as long as I'm happy with it, but at the beginning of Foundation I would have been a little bit ticked off
Jen: Level 1

It took me 2 years to decide where I want to be, what I wanted to do, so now I know this is for me. I wasn't just pushed straight out of college and gone straight there
Lisa: Level 1

I ask people who have come straight from A-Level 'why didn't you do a Foundation?' and they're like 'oh, I didn't need it'. Well it's such a valuable year, because it just gives you that little bit extra time
Frank: Level 2

These respondents also constructed an oppositional identity of 'young' students as being also 'A-Level' students and also being very socially orientated, often making negative comparative remarks:

I think the people chatting in lectures now, I was probably one of those back in high school. Maybe people who have just come out of A-Level just kind of drop into something because they don't know if they want to go and get a job or don't know what to do
Jim: Level 2

A-Level students did not report the strong goals that mature and FE students tended to demonstrate. They showed an awareness of their lesser experience, yet constructed acceptance onto the course as giving them confidence. Despite being a minority group with fewer life skills, being socially orientated in the Halls environment, the course reputation interacted with their self-identity:

Coming from A-Level, everyone says you can't go to a hard course without Foundation or ND, so coming here from an A-Level background and nothing else is something for myself, being told I can't do it and I am doing it
Rob: Level 1

I was in school and we had to see the careers advisor and I said 'I want to be a photographer and I want to go to [my institution] and she said, "OK great well you'll have to do a Foundation". But I've done it and I'm a year ahead of myself, which is more power to me
Loretta: Level 1

A temporal alignment still appears to occur within the peer group into Level 2. For all persisters, personal goals and the academic environment became increasingly

important. For A-Level students this involves gaining both personal experience and academic capital:

With the 2nd year, realising that when I worked I'd get something good out of it, I was actually kind of mature enough at that point to have that freedom and push myself through, to work harder
Mark: Level 2

Survey 3 invited Level 1 students to distinguish how similar the BA course was to their previous course of study. Whilst respondents from all academic backgrounds discussed the academic and conceptual rigour of HE study, this was most true of National Diploma students who explicitly related this to the ethos of their previous course (a point also raised by Newbury, 1997b). It indicates a potential source of challenge for these students which institutions should be alert to in managing students' expectations: *'it was different as I was taught technical rather than ideas which has been hard for me'*.

This was also reflected in interviews:

With ND its all technical stuff, there's no theory, that's what I found quite hard going when I first got here, was the theory side of it
Chris: Level 2

A-Level students however, referred more to the nature of the learning and teaching environment: *'your learning outcomes are reliant upon your own independent reading and research.'* This was also re-iterated in interviews:

At A-Level you didn't have the freedom to do what you wanted; now it's because I want to do it, it's like will power...I know I've got to knuckle down now
Tim: Level 1

On A-Level its very "this is what you have to do; fulfil all these criteria and things", then going to Foundation where its "right, do what you want". I found the Foundation helped me push the briefs a bit more ...I found that you could actually get away with doing what you wanted
Frank: Level 2

Prior qualification does play a role in persistence, not just in terms of academic preparedness, but also in terms of self-confidence and autonomy. For some, the structured nature of Level 1 was a positive experience, yet for others who had already gained these skills, it was confining. This suggests a need for balance, to incorporate the clarified goals of certain students yet support those who do not have them yet, another 'leveling out' process:

I think the 1st year was a bit too structured for me, I was used to having the freedom to do whatever I want...but actually its worked for me in the long run, it helps me focus my ideas really
Jim: Level 2

The 1st year's like school, and you feel like you have to be there, and you get a slap on the wrist if you're not. But I think it has to be like that or people wouldn't stay I think. But this year [Level 2] I think its good
Matt: Level 2

The 1st year was like a huge mass of cattle being herded into a pen in the same direction. And the 2nd year is the cattle being let out into the field and everyone's gone off their different patches of grass
Linda: Level 2

5.5b 'I'm not at university just for the experience of being at university': Student goals & commitments

Whilst **Survey 1** suggested that 'friends' were the one of the most important external factors to encourage Level 1 persistence, (and Young et al (2007) propose that students often construct their reasons for withdrawal around external factors), this was not found to be so explicitly the case in interviews. Participants seemed more likely to contextualise their persistence in more personal (internal) terms, such as goals being met and enjoyment of the course. This may point to flaws in impersonal survey designs as many interview participants referred to the 'difficulty' of delineating between friends (social) and the course (academic), as well as their own goals and interests. This suggests interaction between students' psychological selves (including social ones) and the course of study.

Roberts et al (2003) found that the main reasons for persistence were internal:

- 'Determination to get a good career' (65%)
- 'Not the sort of person to give up easily' (57%)
- 'Learned to cope better' (43%)

External forces of 'Friends at university' (25%) and 'Tutors' (11%) followed these.

However, Roberts et al's study was with Level 2 students, whilst my study was conducted with Level 1 students at the end of their first year. These differences might relate to the timing of my data collection and the temporal nature of students' experience as students' goals changed as they progressed. Level 2 constitutes a 'new beginning' (Mackie, 2001) in itself which could result in goals and responses shifting to

be more internally orientated at this specific time when social networks are long established. **Survey 3** did not suggest that career was important for persistence in February of Level 1, nor were instrumental aims cited by BA Photography Level 1 students as an important reason to enter HE generally (**Survey 2, Figures 35 and 36: Appendix P**). In interviews, whilst Level 1 students tended to look to the degree itself and the love of the subject, career goals became more important as students progressed. This mirrors Roberts et al's suggestions, in that these goals were more internal and self orientated:

I want to go far in life, and get a good degree
[What do you want to do when you finish?]
 Don't know, that's why I'm here
 Tim: Level 1

Before I started it was very much about getting a degree, whereas now its more about developing me as a photographer, as a person
 Matt: Level 2

I'm looking forward to getting it over and done with, like the end of the tunnel. I'm set to be self-employed, I realise I might be able to make money doing it now. The 2nd years ask me for advice, you realise maybe they can see you're getting there too
 Jeff: Level 3

Similarly, BA Photography students responding to an item in **Survey 2** described course related factors as the 'best thing' about their previous course (**Figure 37: Appendix P**). This suggests that early persistence relates to intrinsic motivation and subject interest, (as well as early social integration) but that these become more instrumental and career orientated as students progress through the course. particularly so in Level 3 as part of their 'outbound trajectory' (Wenger, 2000).

In the 3rd year you feel like a photographer, rather than a student, because you're not being taught how to do it; you've already learnt it, now you're doing what you want to do
 Andrew: Level 3

Tinto (1993) proposes that students enter the institution with degrees of commitment to the goal of graduation, mediated along the way by social and academic integration. This construct presumes that Level 1 students have specific goals (e.g. of graduation) that they are able to articulate and work towards in this linear manner. Whilst Sparrow et al (2008) propose that students without any goals are more likely to

depart, or not to engage with the institution socially or academically (Sparrow et al, 2008, p.9), these goals did not necessarily need to be academic in nature (nor did they need to involve intent to graduate). They suggest that:

‘...for some students, particularly school leavers, a primary goal of university could simply be about maturing as an independent person and learner. At this level the students are endeavoring to organise goals and interests, identify a career path, discover like-minded friends and peers, shape their personal development and focus their adult lives...’
(Sparrow et al, 2008, p.9)

There appeared to be little difference between doubters and non-doubters reasons for entering HE and ‘personal academic gain’ was the most commonly cited factor in all three years of **Survey 2** delivery (**Figure 35: Appendix P**). However, this is inconclusive and would be worthy of further investigation, as numbers are so small across data sets it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons (e.g. of the 2008 entering cohort, only 36 students responded to this item in **Survey 2**, and of the same cohort, 55 students subsequently identified themselves as doubters or non doubters in the February (2009) delivery of **Survey 3**). In addition to this, the February delivery of **Survey 3** would not account for doubting in Semester 2, and as it was delivered in class time, it is reasonable to assume that some doubters were not present on the day.

However, this perhaps implies that new students do experience the ‘expectant hope’ that Mackie (2001) describes, but also that it is post-enrolment interaction between students and their immediate course environment that influences doubting and subsequent persistence decisions. This tentative finding finds backing in **Survey 1** responses that suggested a disproportionate spread of doubting across different undergraduate courses (**Figure 19: Appendix M**). Also, as I have previously discussed, there appeared to be differences between doubters and non-doubters relationship with the course. Though again inconclusive as numbers are so small, doubters seemed more likely to cite ‘friends’ (potentially outside the course) as a reason for persistence whilst non-doubters referred more frequently to the ‘course’, ‘tutors’ and ‘personal enjoyment’ (**Figure 18: Appendix M**).

Interview participants (both doubters and non-doubters) within my study rarely mentioned the perceived benefits of ‘graduation’ in itself. They conceptualized goals

around photographic learning that would prepare them for future work within the industry. 'Hannah' conceptualized her persistence comparatively, in terms of her perception of the (poorer) quality of her previous experience on a different BA Photography course at another HEI. Meanwhile, 'Jim' related his persistence to a perception of personal career goals being met by the course. Both referred to the nature (and relevance) of their learning. This contextualization of participants' (psychological) accounts within the external sphere of the course academic environment was true across all data sets, in both surveys and interviews:

I always have to remind myself at the end of the day, even if I end up graduating with like a third, I've done a hell of a lot better coming here and the experience of being on this course compared to my old course. Where I could come out with a first and I'd know nothing in comparison. The standard is so much higher here... the practical things you learn and the ideas and how to relate them

Hannah: Level 2

The inclusion of professional practice was a big difference to me in the second year, suddenly you realize this is actually something I can do and make a living off...You can write an essay, but that's still very academic it doesn't feel very professional, once you start going, "Ok, VAT, this is how you charge someone", then it becomes a lot more real, it's no longer a kind of academic musing, it becomes something concrete, and I think that's quite important

Jim: Level 2

5.5c Interactions: 'Because I think I'm progressing': Feedback, Confidence & Change

Because I think I'm progressing, and I think I can progress more. I'd like to see where I am at the end of 3 years and get a degree, that's the other thing as well

Matt: Level 2

Tait (2004) discusses the tutor (in Open University distance learning) as the 'face' of the HEI. This mirrors Halpin's (1990) findings that contact with academic staff (in a non-residential setting) results in greater integration and subsequent persistence. A key interaction identified in this research was that as students progressed (in line with the community of practice model), persisters changed. Positive feedback (implying the early value placed on tutor/'master') was a major feature of the academic course environment encouraging this.

I think a lot of people who take the feedback at assessments badly are people who don't get regular feedback in tutorials though the whole year

Jim: Level 2

On course **Survey 3** asked Level 1 students in February if they thought they had changed since their October enrolment. Again, the 2008/9 data sets were combined with a 93% response rate to the question (n=89). Of these, 74% (n=66) of respondents thought they had changed, 20% (n=18) thought they had 'maybe' changed and only 4% (n=4) thought they had not changed (**Figure 28: Appendix O**). Interestingly, only two students thought they had changed for the worse, and these students subsequently withdrew from the course. This implies that perhaps surveys such as these can act as early warning systems, particularly when students do not also experience the alignment of goals and confidence which the peer majority experience, as I previously discussed.

A second question inquired in what ways students thought they had changed. Five students did not respond to this question, and the two students who cited negative changes were not included in the analysis. As many respondents gave several ways in which they had changed, responses from those who thought that they had definitely changed (n=59), were aggregated into overall totals. (**Figure 29: Appendix O**). Personal changes e.g. 'growing up' (41%) were important, also a finding of individual interviews):

I've become a lot more comfortable, like the direction I want to take in my work. Even just silly things like making phone-calls, for the first few terms my parents would come and get me and take me back home, but at a certain point I thought "That's ridiculous"...I can't think of anyone who would say they're still at the level they were when they came

Frank: Level 2

A sense of greater self-confidence (39%) (an internal psychological construct) was also reported, though as a measure of internal validity a separate question in this survey asked students whether they felt more confident on the course in February. Of those who responded to both items, three students were excluded, as they did not report they had definitely changed, however they responded their confidence levels had increased (i.e. a change).

The remaining changes related to academic improvement. This involved photographic technical ability (24%) and knowledge and understanding (19%). This potentially relates to a greater degree of personal autonomy and a decreasing reliance on tutor feedback. This was also a suggestion in one-to-one interviews:

In the 2nd year, my practice just started clicking, and I started getting really excited about taking photographs and just knowing where I was going

Chris: Level 2

Students also reported a shift in their photographic tastes and approaches (29%), which hints to the ethos of the course. This was particularly true of National Diploma students, where their previous course had a different (more vocational) value orientation (e.g. Newbury, 1997b). It also suggests the gradual assimilation of students into the ideological environment of the photographic community at course level.

The figures provided in **Figures 30 and 31 (Appendix O)** also show increasing confidence levels of students in February of Level 1. There was a 98% response rate to the question (n=94) over two consecutive Level 1 cohorts (2008/9). 41% (n=39) felt confident on the course, 48% (n=45) 'maybe' felt confident and 11% (n=10) did not feel confident. In 2009 an additional question had been added to **Survey 3** investigating student doubting. Unsurprisingly, more non-doubters (44%, n=14) definitely felt confident in February than non-doubters (n=7). Students who had responded they did or 'maybe' felt more confident in the combined data set (n=84) were invited to give the reasons why this was the case, three students did not answer this question (n=81).

Figures in **Appendix O** mirror the findings from individual interviews in that feedback (54%) (this was mainly from tutors, but respondents also included peer feedback, or made no distinction between the two) was the main reason for increased confidence. Other responses were more individual and psychologically orientated. 23% of respondents reported an increased sense of personal agency, independence and enjoyment of the subject matter. 10% made explicit reference to a temporal experience (and these were separated out), and the remaining 11% referred to other on-course contexts (excluding feedback) such as the course structure and deadlines.

However the majority of students had not felt confident on the course at the time of their enrolment. This suggests that interaction with institutional environments and potentially internal personal changes had influenced self-confidence levels:

I think that attendance, coming to lecturers, going to tutorials and things...the more you do it the more you feel comfortable in the course, the work you're doing, just by getting to know tutors, by getting feedback...But I think a lot of people don't do that and then they get some criticism; I'd just go off and carry on, taking it into account but not being offended by it, maybe they take it a bit too much to heart

Jen: Level 1

It seemed like everyone was better than me, and because everyone had come from education they knew what they were doing...when we had assessment and things I realized I wasn't doing too bad

Linda: Level 2

Discussing formative assessment in an art and design context, Blair (2006) acknowledges the subjective nature of art and design education:

'There is no one right answer, known final destination or conclusion to a given problem or project'

(Blair, 2006, p.84)

This suggests that growing confidence to become more autonomous is an important feature of persistence. This is important, given the non-diadactic nature of the medium, where students complete individual and personal photographic projects. As I have previously discussed, they may well compare themselves to peers (e.g. the experience of Annie) which (if confidence levels are not aligned with the majority) may result in a lack of self-confidence and potentially withdrawal. Students need to be able to navigate the subjective nature of this feedback, and this was recognised:

I think there's a balance between your own ideas and seeing people [tutors], which I think is a good thing. And listening to what they have to say rather than rejecting it, or working with what they're saying and listening to their experience

Tom: Level 1

A maths degree gives you the knowledge to do maths, but something like photography, you have to have not only the knowledge to do it, but the kind of confidence in your own convictions to push that forwards, if that makes sense

Matt: Level 2

Although Matt continued,

I think that confidence comes from the course. I don't think you can just become confident just by yourself; it's a combination of everything I think

Matt: Level 2

Kluger and De Nisi (1996) suggest that there is also a self-factor related to feedback in that students' perceptions of themselves or their prior experience of interpretation or understanding of feedback can 'block learning'. The element of 'prior experience' within this suggestion implies that certain prior educational experiences can give students the educational capital to be better equipped to deal with autonomy, subjectivity and feedback (Kluger and De Nisi, 1996, p.266). Related to this, Vazquez-Abad et al (1997) reported that not only do withdrawing students feel less confident in their knowledge, skills and ability, those who are less confident upon entry are more likely to depart. These forces therefore suggest that persistence is related positively interactions between to tutor relationships, and internal self-confidence, maturity and the ability to manage autonomy and subjective modes of feedback.

I previously discussed how prior qualifications might impact upon students' perceptions of their personal and academic growth, the construction of their academic and personal goals and their confidence levels. Findings from **Survey 3** appeared to support this, as the February confidence levels were compared with entry confidence levels on the basis of academic qualification (**Figures 32, 33 and 34: Appendix O**). Again, as the sample size is so small, the integration of qualitative data with these findings was paramount, as quantitative data alone could only suggest tentative relationships. Of particular interest, was the early confidence reported by Foundation Diploma students, the overall lack of confidence cited by National Diploma students, as well as the growing

confidence of some A-Level students. This supported the earlier qualitative findings that A-Level students seemed to gain confidence from being accepted onto the course, whilst National Diploma students referred to the difference in philosophical values between HE (more academic) and their previous vocational study.

Self-confidence related to perceptions of the course environment, as a 'push' or 'pull' force. For example, the curriculum is very structured in Level 1 and gradually becomes more independent into Levels 2 and 3. For some students, (with low self confidence and/or unspecific goals) transition to a more independent learning environment was a difficult push factor that made them consider withdrawal. However for other confident students with strongly defined personal goals, the same curricular structure acted as a 'pull'. This suggests that some students need additional academic support in overcoming this shift:

I think it's because the first year is so structured and stuff, when you're left to yourself it's quite a big change. And I'm a bit like a rabbit in headlights almost
Hannah: Level 2

In retrospect the 1st year was great, but at the time I was sort of struggling, It was a question of patience more than anything else, the things that I wanted to do I knew I would be able to get to, but I just couldn't get there when I wanted to all the time...
Jim: Level 2

However, for both 'Hannah' and 'Jim' cited above, the course itself still remained a pull in terms of the perceived benefits that persistence through more difficult times and challenges would bring.

5.5d Interactions: 'Photography is my passion': Subject interest as 'pull'

The majority of survey respondents (Figure 18: Appendix M) had cited 'the course' (including by implication the subject of photography) as a 'pull' factor (which encouraged them to remain) that was the primary reason for their persistence. This was positioned as an interaction of the course meeting personal goals, interests and motivators. A common theme was students' interest in the subject material itself, though this was constructed as 'doing' photography. Therefore this related to photographic practice (rather than theoretical aspects), which lends support to Tinto's (2009b) and Grove White's (2003) suggestions that perceptions of relevance in learning

is important. However, this also suggests that persisters had chosen the right course for them in terms of subject (Yorke, 2002) and was particularly true of those who cited instrumental goals and/or career related goals in relation to the subject of photography.

The main one [reason for persistence] would probably be because I know I want to get a degree in photography

Annie: Level 2

I'm not at university for the experience of being at university, I'm here because I like this course, I love photography this is what I want to do and this is to me the next stage in my life, this is what I've got to do to get to wherever I want to be

Loretta: Level 1

To return to Annie's account of her lack of self-confidence (and subsequent doubting) and her perception that her cohort peer group had more clarified career related goals. Annie perceived her peers as being consequently stronger and more focused in terms of their photographic practice.

I just feel like I'm never going to get a job in photography because I'm not good enough, that's why I just feel like "Oh well, what's the point in carrying on if I'm not going to get anything out of it

Annie: Level 2

However, Annie was not without instrumental goals. She wanted to 'get a degree' but was also clear that it was her love of photography itself that encouraged her to remain, despite doubts:

I just think back to when I first came here and when I was applying, and I think, "Well, actually photography is my passion, and I do actually love doing it". I'm just finding it hard at the minute, I think that's what keeps me.

Annie: Level 2

These accounts were not uncommon. Other doubting students referred to their interest in the subject itself as a pull factor:

There were points where I thought I won't come back, and then I just started missing photography to be honest, and yeah, that was it really

Alex: Level 2

However, as I previously discussed, for other students, there was a shift in motivation from a more abstract general interest, to one which was more career related:

I don't know, for me, the degree started out as kind of, not an academic exercise, but it was something I was interested in and wanted to pursue, and as I pursued it my interest developed further into something I wanted to pursue as a career professionally

Jim: Level 2

Survey 3 asked Level 1 students how they motivated themselves (an internal construct), (with a combined data set of 89 responses). It also asked what factors motivated students most, (potentially an additional external dimension) to which a total of 76 students responded in 2008/9. However, for both items students reported both internal and external contexts. As some students gave multiple reasons these were analysed for frequency of theme. Self-motivation often stemmed from 'doing the work', a virtuous cycle of practice that also involved increased confidence and autonomy in their photographic practice. This accounted for 39% of responses and included comments such as:

- I know once I start doing the work I will enjoy it and get into it
- Keeping on top of the work and exploring new ideas
- By researching, getting outside and taking photo's

External forces accounted for 27% of responses, with explicit reference made to the socio-academic nature of the peer group and tutor feedback:

- Working with other students to motivate and encourage each other
- Frequent tutorials for feedback
- Lectures and tutorials motivate me

This was further contextualized in the latter item, as students began to explicitly report the interactions that motivated them. They mainly referred to feedback and 'people' (as discussed previously), but also began to introduce the structured nature of the (external) Level 1 curriculum:

- When I get positive feedback on my work if I feel better about what I'm doing I'm more likely to want to do more
- Tutorials really help me clarify what I'm doing and once everything is clear in my head I can work a lot better
- Projects that are free and restricted at the same time because I have guidelines that make me do something but at the same time I'm not forced to do it in a set way

However, the most common factor (40%) in which students motivated themselves were internally related to personal contexts and strategies as well as individual goals:

- Think about the end result and something to be proud of
- Pressure from my family
- Set my own goals with rewards e.g. chocolate

Again, when the latter question invited a detailed response, many linked an enjoyment of the subject with an instrumental personal goal:

- Wanting the degree – I like to learn. It may be the best thing I accomplish at this stage of my life
- The thought of living off what I love to do
- Getting somewhere in life and being successful in something I enjoy

Findings from **Survey 3** suggested that Level 1 students were more likely to cite internal factors (as they interacted with the course/subject area) than external course environments as motivating factors. However, prior to entry, the external course environment was more frequently cited as a factor that motivated (**Survey 2, Figure 41: Appendix P**). Students again appear to become more autonomous as they progress.

5.5e Interactions: It's just a question of the things they're going to have to sacrifice to get there'. An economic perspective: perceptions of costs, benefit & gain

The relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic goals and students' perceptions of the course environment as meeting these is a complex one. It also changes as students' progress throughout the course. Also students have different goals that influence their perception of 'cost' and satisfaction. However, it was clear that all students weighed up the costs and benefits of persisting within this economic framework:

If people want to get places they can, it's just a question of the things they're going to have to sacrifice to get there

Frank: Level 2

Jeff was a mature student (late 20's) who had very strong profession related goals. He was explicit about these cost/benefit decisions, academically, in terms of the relevance of his learning and socially, regarding the peer group:

I came from a working background and I settled in the area quite quickly. I'm used to assessing the situation and I wondered if it was worth it. At times, I thought it was a waste of time, [I was] disillusioned with the reasons for coming to uni, I wasn't learning enough and improving my job prospects. I was sick of being surrounded by kids.

Jeff: Level 3

Jeff reflected back on his Level 1 experiences (and had given a similar response to **Survey 1**). Leppel, (2001) suggests this cost analysis involves exploration of individual goal commitment, subject interest, familial support and understanding and self-image in

relation to the subject. For example this included their reasons for attending HE in the first place (**Figures 35 and 36: Appendix P**) and perceptions of 'relevance' of different aspects of the curriculum.

Jim also had strong career related goals and referred quite negatively to his peers (interestingly also constructing these as 'school-leavers') whom he felt were merely travelling along an educational 'treadmill' with no strong commitment to the subject matter or related future aspirations:

I think the people who have come because it's the next step, it's what you're supposed to do, following a kind of unwritten format, you go to school, you finish school. You go to university, you finish university, you get a job... that's the people who don't really care so much, it's kind of a step on the way.

Jim: Level 2

As I have discussed, Instrumental (e.g. the goal of graduation or future career prospects) and integrative (e.g. commitment to the institution or peer group) motivation operate at different times throughout the student lifecycle. I found that in **Survey 2**, new BA Photography students did not refer to 'graduation' explicitly, and though 'getting a degree' was a feature of interview data, it was positioned as secondary to the subject itself. Personal academic gain was the most important reason cited by BA Photography students, as first choice, (**Figure 35: Appendix P**) and as an aggregate over-all of the multiple reasons given for entering HE. In Stage's (1989) terms students' perceptions of gain (benefit) through study may relate to cognitive goals (interest) and subsequently certification goals (or instrumental career and qualification) (**Figure 36: Appendix P**).

Students enter institutions with a number of academic goals and aspirations. Therefore (in terms of my conceptual framework) the course environment is highly influential in subsequent persistence decisions. From an economic perspective, it implies that students evaluate their on-course experiences as personal attributes (particularly subject interest) interact with the course (and pedagogic practices such as feedback). These are in turn related to future gain and career goals. This relates back to the nature of photography itself, as spanning profession and non-profession based (academic and vocational) divides, and being open to a plurality of internal 'pull'

forces/goals in operation (intrinsic or instrumental) to encourage persistence.

Interviews confirmed this complex view:

The most important things about the course [are]...afterwards and what you come out with and how you're taught and what the teachers are like and stuff

Tim: Level 1

It may also account for variation in persistence rates of different courses within the same institution. Leppel (2001) warns that students who are instrumentally orientated (and decide on their chosen undergraduate subject area based on their perceptions of future (financial) gain) may be more likely to become disillusioned with subject material and subsequently withdraw. **Survey 2** (2007) comparatively investigated seven courses within my HEI. The rationale for this was that early findings had indicated the importance of the course. It was also my own 'insider' observation that course environments differed within my single institution. These seven courses were selected on the basis of their differences as less profession based (e.g. English, Fine Art) or more profession based (e.g. Journalism, Graphic Design). The aim of this was to further 'situate' the BA Photography course through comparative analysis of students' reasons for entering HE and the institution.

Figure 38 (Appendix P) suggests that students who enrolled on courses that are situated at the more profession based end of the continuum appeared more likely to cite practical and career related gain as a reason for entering HE. This supports Leppel's (2001, 2005) suggestions that future goals and perceptions of future financial success may shape students' choice of subject. However if students who highly value future gains choose subjects they are not necessarily interested in, it may be a concern for courses such as BA Journalism.

However, it suggests that BA Photography students showed high levels of subject interest and aspirations of personal academic gain which are important 'pull' forces.

This finding occurred across three years of delivery of **Survey 2 (Figures 35 and 36:**

Appendix P) If BA Photography students are initially intrinsically motivated by subject interest then this may be another area where ADM possesses natural disposition for persistence. It also includes the common route of prior FE study that gives students

more time to 'test' their interest, as Film, Journalism and English students are also more likely to come from A-Level backgrounds. Tinto's (1993) model suggests students enter the institution with varying degrees of goal commitment, which in turn influences integration and subsequent persistence. However these findings suggest that different courses attract students with varying forms of goals, both instrumental and personal, and these should be important considerations in future research.

Figures 39 and 40 (Appendix P) also suggest different contextual factors operating at individual course level. Students were asked for their reasons for attending my institution itself. This was in response to Tinto's (1993) suggestions that students' commitment to the HEI (or course) is an important predictor of persistence. BA Photography students 1st choice responses (**Figure 39**) suggested students were very aware of the high 'reputation' of my HEI, though it was unclear in this response whether they referred to the institution or the course. However, BA English students (perhaps the least profession based course represented) were more likely to cite other contextual factors. Breakdowns of these other contextual factors are shown in **Figure 40 (Appendix P)**. Interestingly, the location of my HEI was an important consideration, and was also cited as a reason for persistence in **Survey 1**. This suggests that additional institutional contextual features are at work in the persistence process.

From a sociological perspective, Berger (2002) proposes that students seek to optimise their levels of capital, whilst institutions (and courses) can also be selective through their own organisational capital (Berger, 2000, p.106-113). This may relate to persistence patterns when students perceive a benefit in attending certain institutions and specific courses. The acknowledgement of reputation and perceptions of future 'benefit', may out-weigh the 'costs' or challenges students experience on-course (Leppel, 2001).

This also implies students' perception of future personal (e.g. career) gain though course reputation also encourages persistence. Dörnyei (1994) proposes there is interplay between two motivational sub-systems in the student experience that operate at course level (Dörnyei, 1994, p.274). These are integrative (the social and peer related

desire to be a member of a community (e.g. McFadden and Munns, 2002) and instrumental (practical gains, e.g. a better job). This somewhat mirrors Brower's (1990) concepts of achievement and affiliation motivation orientations. However, in terms of persistence, these motivational sub-systems do not need to be considered as mutually exclusive (as also found by Prospero and Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Level 1 students value social systems at institutional and course specific level, but they also experience 'pulls' (more so as they progress) in the form of their own academic and personal goals and increasing self confidence.

I will now turn to both the conclusive and tentative findings of this study, offering suggestions and recommendations where other institutions might improve the student experience and enhance student retention 'by design' (Johnstone, 2007).

6 Conclusions & Recommendations: Why do BA Photography students persist in their studies?

Well, the most important thing is the course...I think they're an intertwined thing, the course and you. You can't really differentiate between them
Jim: Level 2

This study has aimed to explore undergraduate student persistence within a single course and institution. It seeks to identify the forces that encourage persistence despite the challenges which all students face. In unpicking the interactions between students' internal personal attributes and the external institutional environment I aim to generate transferable recommendations for practice.

These findings are organised around the dual social (e.g. friends) and academic (e.g. the course) strands of the external student experience. However, I have discussed how these interact with the different internal characteristics of individual students, such as age, prior qualification and place of residence, as well as personal goals, self-confidence and motivation. Although both social and academic spheres (at course and/or institutional level) impact on students' persistence decisions, it appears students' (internal) perceptions of the external course environment are the most important.

However, as I have discussed, there is a temporal element to these interactions. Students' change as they progress through the course. Persisters experience a gradual alignment as part of a normative process within the peer group that involves commitment (to the course and/or subject matter) and instrumental goals (including the ability to articulate them). The external course environment therefore becomes increasingly important (both socially and academically) as students' trajectories (Wenger 2001) near post-graduation employment pathways, whether this relates to an internal motivation enter the photographic industry or a desire to 'do well'.

6.1 Overview of findings

The key findings of this research relate mainly to the temporal interactions between students (internal) experiences and goals with (mainly) the course environment:

- 1) Level 1 students who are mature or who have undertaken an FE qualification are more likely to be more explicitly goal orientated. They tend to prioritize socio-academic experiences within the course itself as most important for their persistence.
- 2) Students are more likely to value the formation of social networks and making friends early in the student lifecycle, particularly in Term 1. This becomes less important as they progress, as the academic sphere of the course environment becomes more important for persistence.
- 3) When students' personal, cognitive and instrumental goals become aligned with the peer group majority, persistence is more likely. In the main, these goals become increasingly more instrumental in nature as students progress.
- 4) Successful access to broad institutional communities is valued more by young Level 1 students who live on campus in Halls of Residence. These students are also more likely to experience a 'separation' stage from their home communities and a period of personal and academic 'growing up'.
- 5) Vacations are a period when students are vulnerable to doubting due to the lack of contact with institutional and course environments.
- 6) Students who have an intrinsic interest in the subject material (Photography), have related career goals and can navigate (or 'separate' from) the ideological values and learning and teaching strategies of their prior qualification, gain greater personal autonomy and confidence over time and are more likely to persist.
- 7) 'People' are important for persistence. The tutor is most important early in Level 1, but gradually becomes less so. As students gain confidence and autonomy the course peer group becomes increasingly important.
- 8) Positive and early feedback (from both tutors and peers) is important to increase levels of self-confidence that can buffer students (particularly in Level 1) from the other challenges they face in their lives. It also mitigates the early lack of confidence many students report they feel.

There were also a number of suggestive findings, as yet unsubstantiated by this study but potentially worth of further investigation:

- 1) Non-doubters were more likely to cite aspects of the course experience as a reason for persistence. This includes the course, tutors and facilities, as well as personal enjoyment and their goals being met. Doubters however, were more likely to cite friends and increasing self-confidence as well as being more likely to acknowledge the time and commitment already spent on the course as a reason for persistence.
- 2) Students with who do not experience congruence of instrumental/academic goals may experience lack of self-confidence within the peer community.
- 3) Commuter students appear more likely to experience dual socialization and be more pro-active making friends. Their persistence is mediated by the value they place on the socio-academic environment of the course.
- 4) Students who do not engage with the course environment (e.g. through non attendance) appear to be less integrated, and do not seem to benefit from the bolstered self-confidence that feedback (through contact) brings.
- 5) The specialized nature of my HEI means it may be more likely for students to be able to meet 'like minded people'. This appears to be the result of the overlap in subject matter on different courses and the greater emphasis put on the subject/course environment as students progress and social and academic realms converge.
- 6) Young, school A-Level students appear to be given a confidence boost when they are accepted onto selective courses with a majority cohort who have completed National Diploma/Foundation diploma, (Further Education) qualifications

As discussed in the Literature Review, this study meets the explicit recommendation by the NAO (2007) to investigate retention at subject (or course) level (Bourn, 2007, p.12). As this is a professional doctorate my research findings aim also to make recommendations for improved practices at both course and institutional level. As institutional contexts can change, and students' entry characteristics cannot (e.g. Kinzie et al, 2008, p.23), I will structure these in relation to institutional 'actions'. I will initially contextualise these in relation to wider (and more generic) environments before addressing course contexts as a discrete socio-academic community of practice. I will relate these two external settings to the internal biographical and psychological attributes of students that institutions must respond to.

'The emphasis is on the conditions in which institutions place students rather than on the attributes of students themselves. Student attributes are fixed: the conditions in which they learn are not.'
(Tinto, 2003, p.5)

Recommendation 1:

6.2 Researching the student experience at institutional & course level

Relates to research findings:

- Plurality of the student experience in social and academic terms, contextualized within the specific local characteristics of institution, course and student body.
- Different philosophical attitudes of different subject areas (and within this different courses), given the importance of student interest in the subject matter for persistence.
- Importance of integration when young residential students need to 'separate' from prior communities and that vacation times are a common reason for 'doubting'.

A key finding of this research was that specific contextual features at course and institutional level operated as external push/pull forces as they interacted with students' internal characteristics. Therefore in terms of generalising this research, other institutions should attempt to identify these. In relation to these contexts, the specific reasons for persistence/withdrawal may differ, and HEI's should investigate these trends at local level to target retention initiatives. Tinto (1993) also takes this view:

'Though institutions can and should learn from the experiences of other colleges and universities, it remains for each institution to discern for itself the particular events which shape student departure from its campus.'
(Tinto, 1993, p.6)

For example, Yorke and Longden (2004, 2008) propose (In a UK national context) that withdrawal can relate to the institution in terms of students' flawed decision-making (though less so in an art and design context), failure to meet the demands of the course and unhappiness with the wider social environment (Yorke and Longden, 2004, p.132). However, my findings (as a case study) suggest that these would not be applicable to every institution. Factors such as institutional location, course reputation, class demographic and size, curricular design, even the nature of the subject of study as profession or non-profession based should also be taken into consideration. Similarly the timing of student withdrawal (e.g. Tinto, 1988) as earlier or later in the academic year can give pointers to where institutions should target their retention efforts.

Institutions should firstly undertake extensive research at both institutional and course-specific levels to examine the reasons and timing of withdrawal in their own local

context. The practice of 'exit interviews' should be mainstreamed to fully unpick students' decision-making processes to target areas for institutional attention and may also encourage students to feel that the institution 'cares' about their withdrawal enough to seek to understand it. This potentially minimises the risk of an individual leaving HE for good. HESA statistics only allow for a single reason to be recorded and data from institutional 'withdrawal' forms are similarly problematic, perhaps masking factors involving the implicit workings of the institution itself. They take little account of multiple reasons or the specific characteristics of each individual account and are dominated by vague, aggregating categories that are insufficient to explore student withdrawal at individual, institutional or course levels. To understand the student experience as it is contextually 'lived' in situ, is of vital importance. The student voice and perceptions can provide us with important contexts to give us pointers to where institutions can take responsibility, challenge existing practices and 'improve retention by design' (Johnston, 2002).

Recommendation 2:

6.3 Ongoing engagement of academic tutors & support staff

Relates to my research findings:

- Academic tutors are highly important to students early in their study. The provision of feedback can boost self-confidence and encourage subsequent persistence, as well as help students navigate the different HE academic environment
- Students primarily tend to look to the course staff as a source of pastoral (and academic) support as opposed to generic institutional support services

Students' relationships with their tutors are an important (especially early) mediator of student persistence. In terms of my own findings, this is vital, as it is the course sphere that acts as the primary external 'pull' factor to encourage student persistence. Tutors (and peers) are the 'people' who populate this domain (another important dimension of social ties within the academic environment). It is particularly important to recognise this in the face of increasing student numbers and the subsequent strain put on teaching staff with multiple responsibilities (e.g. research, subject delivery and marking/feedback).

The provision of a personal tutoring system may go some way in enhancing the provision of pastoral support and helping students navigate the social and academic terrain of the HE environment (often very dissimilar from students' prior educational experiences). It may also go some way to mediate the invalidity of student disclosure on institutional withdrawal forms and explicitly indicate to students that the HEI cares about their welfare. These personal tutors can also demonstrate the value of and guide students in navigating the plethora of generic institutional support services, which students perhaps do not use enough.

However, Braxton (2008) suggests that the engagement of academic staff lacks parity. Some tutors may not view student retention as their concern, though they may be interested in students' academic achievement:

'College and university faculty members view institutional efforts to increase institutional rates of student retention as an administrative matter. Put differently, faculty members tend to view such institutional efforts as seeking an instrumental goal and not a substantive goal such as enhancing student learning. As a consequence, they disregard student retention as their responsibility.'

(Braxton 2008, p.103)

However, as Braxton (2008) continues, in line with the modifications Tinto made to his original 1993 model, academics could be persuaded to embrace student retention through the importance of the classroom and effective student learning for student persistence. Additionally, a reflection on learning and teaching strategies encourages success for all students, not just those deemed as 'at risk' due to sociological identity alone, which again may not encourage change. Increased accountability of academic staff could be mediated by the provision of staff development opportunities, and what Braxton (2008) terms 'academic reward structures' (e.g. salary benefits or promotion). Pascarella et al (2008) state:

'Our findings underscore the salience of faculty behaviours in student persistence decisions by suggesting that it is not just their non-classroom interactions with students that count, but also their actual classroom instructional behaviours. Exposure to instructional behaviours that enhance learning (organization and clarity) might also increase the probability of a student's persistence at an institution by increasing his or her sense of overall satisfaction with the education being received.'
(Pascarella et al, 2008, p.67)

Students do utilise these economic 'cost/benefit' assessments in their persistence decisions such as perceptions of tutors 'caring' about them and the quality and relevance of learning in relation to their goals. This may also play a role in the investigation of contextual differences between courses within the same HEI, as subject philosophy may play a role in the attitudes of staff members. Whilst Photography is a subjective subject by nature, Braxton (2008) observes that:

'Faculty in low-consensus [such as Political Science and Sociology] disciplines show a greater interest in teaching and receive higher student course evaluations than faculty members in high-consensus fields [such as Physics and Chemistry].'
(Braxton and Hargens, 1996, cited in Braxton, 2008, p.109)

This would suggest therefore that some consensus of the explicit nature of the subject/course studied is required to identify and target institutional strategy.

Recommendation 3:

6.4 Provision of early social opportunities for all students

Relates to my research findings:

- Students tend to value developing social networks early in Level 1. They subsequently become more interested in the academic domains of their experience
- Young residential students experience a 'separation' stage from home communities and institutional social ties help encourage a sense of belonging and persistence

My findings suggest that having 'friends' is a highly important factor that encourages persistence, particularly early in Level 1. I would also suggest that students' commitment to the institution and a sense that the HEI is interested in them is also important. Therefore the earlier we can encourage these connections to be made and a sense of belonging instilled in the new student, the more 'pull' factors they will experience. However, Stutzman (2006) points out that 'students are forced to renegotiate their social networks every semester' and in some (lecture based) contexts students experience a transitory modular experience with little means to integrate with the peer group (another important mediator of persistence in my findings).

Tinto (2009b) recommends the formation of 'learning communities', where students co-register in related classes (and this would be an important consideration for lecture based courses/institutions to consider), to maximise the social opportunities for all students. However, this is not the case in my own research context as a 'whole cohort' learning experience. However, large class sizes have resulted in 'learning groups' being formed, which facilitated students' access to the peer group at the same time as learning. Either way, the ability for students to meet other 'like minded' individuals (in terms of interest in the subject matter or having some other common experience such as living together in Halls of Residence) is important for persistence.

Stutzman, (2006) discusses the use of Facebook as a way of supporting students' information needs, but argues that this is led by 'situational relevance'. This concept recognises that we have primary (i.e. close friends and family) and secondary (e.g. co-workers, class-mates) networks, but that the relative importance of these which change at different times in our lives (rather like the reasons for persistence). Pre-entry

students are a vulnerable group because they are in flux. My findings suggest that making new friends is a main goal of students in this time therefore social networking would be relevant. It would also help commuting students to meet people with similar interests and help young residential students navigate the separation stage.

Tinto does not address the potential for electronic social integration. Instead, his research appears to conceptualize social integration as the more traditional, face-to-face, physical contact with peers and staff. However, the community of practice model I have used in this research would also include the potential for a community to exist in a broader sense, e.g. in an academic context through e-learning mechanisms. As Lesser and Storck (2002) point out:

'...there is nothing in the classical sociological definition of community of practice that rules out communication media such as e-mail, discussion groups, or chat rooms as support mechanisms for participating in distributed communities of practice.'
(Lesser and Storck, 2002, p.832)

Indeed, findings from **Survey 2 (Appendix Q)** suggests that new students at my own HEI greatly value the provision of a pre-entry online 'chat-room' in which they can pre-emptively create social networks/ties, make new friends (and gain information) prior to physical arrival, again perhaps important given the rural location of my HEI.

Kang (2000) suggests:

'Cyberspace makes talking with strangers easier. The fundamental point of many cyber-realms, such as chat rooms, is to make new acquaintances. By contrast, in most urban settings, few environments encourage us to walk up to strangers and start chatting.'
(Kang, 2000, cited in Morris et al, 2009, p.313)

In a temporal model, summer contact and activity such as this could encourage persistence through fostering a sense of belonging, but also as a means of information provision prior to entry that helps manage student expectations. It also broadens students' social integration opportunities, perhaps particularly important for commuter students as pathway to integration on an equal footing to those who choose to live on campus. My findings suggest that 'friends' who encourage persistence may not necessarily be peers who are on the same course, they can be other students within the institution generally, those who have similar interests and attitudes.

This could also be a means by which the personal tutor can pro-actively establish early summer contact with new students. However, a key consideration in the use of Facebook and its like, as primarily a *social* networking tool, would relate to potential perceived intrusion into the personal lives of both students and staff. A network housed on the university server could offer 'academic credibility' and is more easily moderated (Mazer, 2007, p.3). This also offers pathways for future research, in that social integration in the electronic age might be clarified. Investigating social networking can provide 'real time' access to student behaviour (rather than merely their accounts of it) (Morris et al, 2009, p.315) though research in this area will require ethical considerations to be taken into account. For example, these considerations would include issues of privacy and informed consent in online environments as well as the potential for researchers covert observation (ESRC, 2010, p. 32)..

Recommendation 4:

6.5 Access to the peer group as a social environment within an academic community of practice

Relates to my research findings:

- The peer social environment offered by the course is most important for commuter and mature students. However it becomes increasingly more valued by young residential students (particularly A-Level students) as corresponding academic goals become more important to them
- There is a period of peer alignment between mature students and students who have completed an FE qualification, and those younger students who have come from the less advanced A-Level qualification

If we consider the immediate course environment as somewhat analogous to a community of practice, that students become less dependent on the tutor as they progress, gain confidence and autonomy, and the socio-academic nature of the peer group becomes more important, then we must look to ways in which students can become successfully integrated into this group. As Tinto's (2009b) 'learning communities' offer students the opportunities to meet peers with similar subject interests, increased integration within the peer group may also encourage the development of instrumental (cognitive or career related) goals in relation to this, therefore increasing commitment to the course and therefore promoting persistence.

My HEI runs an on-course Level 2 – Level 1 student mentoring scheme, and I would advocate wider use of this approach in other institutional contexts. Similarly, the development of alumni networks might help students to capitalize on the socio-academic community the course offers, help clarify goals (especially for Level 1, A-Level students) and realize these in an instrumental way. It could also make the future (career related) benefits of persisting on the course more 'real' (e.g. the use of alumni for Levels 2 and 3 students). I would recommend increasing social contact within the peer group to aid the social integration of all students within the course environment. For example, student exhibitions and private views are common in the art and design environment through) and these also encourage non-teaching related contact between students and academic staff.

Recommendation 5:

6.6 'At-risk' environments: re- conceptualising 'at-risk' students

Relates to my research findings:

- Students' sociological characteristics (e.g. age, place of residence and prior qualification) may include features which make them more susceptible to doubting, but each of these factors brings with it characteristics which might also act as 'pull' forces
- Persisting students become more 'similar' as they progress. They gain capital and adhere to the normative values of the peer group. The course environment becomes increasingly more important as it relates to goals and outward post-graduation pathways

Although the literature suggests that withdrawal is linked to, for example, lower socio-economic status, entry qualifications, age and subject. However, I argue that this is not implicit in itself; it is environments and cultures that put these students at risk. If we are to consider 'at risk' institutional environments rather than at risk individuals, we must consider all student voices, so called 'traditional' and 'non-traditional', those who stay and those who leave. A re-conceptualization of this trend is to consider (for example, as Mackie, 2002, and Christie et al, 2006, do), that all students face challenges, ('push' factors that may encourage withdrawal considerations) but that importantly, they also possess or experience 'pull' factors that encourage persistence. Student class representative reports and regular class evaluations (or 'health-checks') could provide a means to assess how these 'push' and 'pull' factors operate at local level. Similarly the results of the National Student Survey could be used to identify problem areas (these are published online and are also increasingly used as a mechanism for potential students in selecting institutions).

This, in conjunction with the data gathered from withdrawing students, could indicate which areas (at course and wider institutional level) should be targeted and addressed to improve student retention. My interaction model (between student and institution) does not presume that certain groups of students (e.g. 'non-traditional') may not face additional or specific challenges that can act as 'push' factors. Kinzie et al, (2008) state:

'Because the undergraduate experience of historically underrepresented students may differ from that of the white majority, the factors linked to student retention must be examined for different groups of students.'

(Kinzie et al, 2008, p.22)

However, in my own institutional context there are low numbers of ethnic minority students so no explicit recommendations can be made regarding the experience of this particular demographic. I would argue that simply aggregating student characteristics is not enough. Rather, categories of potential susceptibility to specific (academic and social) challenges should be identified. The more of these characteristics that a student possesses, the more challenges they will face. My research findings suggest that important student characteristics that institutions should investigate as a starting point within local contexts broadly relate to intertwined internal characteristics of:

- Prior Qualifications
- Age
- Levels of self-confidence
- Place of Level 1 Residence
- Strength of subject interest
- Commitments to personal goals

For example, a mature student *may* also have familial responsibilities and originate from the local area and *may* also be a commuter student. They *may* also be part of a class cohort of significantly younger students, *may* feel less confident and *may* not possess qualifications that provide optimal academic preparation for the course. This approach avoids the assumption that 'at risk' characteristics are inherently indigenous to all students within the particular demographic of *mature*. However, these students may also be buffered from 'push' factors by socialization within the course environment, familial support, a strong commitment to the subject, personal maturity and instrumental goal orientation.

As a starting point for other HEI's, my findings suggest that a strong interest in the subject as well as successfully developing instrumental (subject related) goals is a 'pull' feature for those students who are mature or who have (a related factor) completed prior FE qualifications, rather than young, residential A-Level students.

Therefore this latter group of students should be supported in developing the goal-orientated behaviour of (in my context) the peer group majority. In a temporal (community of practice) model, these students are further along a trajectory that encompasses goals and interest.

In my own institutional context, many withdrawing students cite their intention to return to study the same (or a similar) subject at another institution. Perhaps, the common practice of completing a FE qualification in art and design (or a related specialism) perhaps provides additional time to for students to evaluate their subject choice decisions at an earlier stage. This indicates the importance of pre-entry qualifications and these should be investigated at local levels. The practice of interviewing can assess these initial subject and institutional commitments, as well as encourage early visits to the campus and engagement with academic staff. Late entrants (or Clearing entrants) may be particularly at risk here, potentially having made rushed decisions or not being on the course or HEI of their 1st choice therefore having lower commitment. Early 'entry' interviews with these individuals can proactively make early personal contact, assess vulnerability to doubting and put any supportive measures in place.

6.7 Concluding Remarks: Student Persistence... whose responsibility is it anyway?

This study has utilized a mixed method research design that sought to investigate student persistence on an individual course at an HEI with particular characteristics. The broad themes generated by the larger scale survey items were subsequently investigated at individual student level, an approach that I would justify as it located persistence (of a small group of students) within the ideas expressed in the literature, yet also within participants' own specific lived contexts (both institutionally and personally). However, as I posit that each institution has its own characteristics that influence these decisions (e.g. Tinto, 1993), I also propose that these operate at specific course level, even within the same HEI. Future research should look to student/environment interactions that pay heed to specific features of the course environment itself.

For me, in an ADM environment, further development of this study will look to the influence of subject interest (i.e. in Photography) in mediating persistence decisions, as well as students' perceptions of the nature of the photographic medium itself (as it exists outside the institutional ivory tower). It is possible that the introduction of top-up fees may affect recruitment and retention in less profession-based (or art based) subject areas. It may become even more important to understand students' economic perceptions of gain (as they pay £9000 a year to attend university). In a similar vein, I wish to more fully explore the notion of a practice-based photographic course as analogous to a community of practice, and more fully understand the socio-academic nature of interactions between 'people' within course boundaries.

As an 'insider' researcher, this research process has been a valuable one, to better understand the needs of my own students and to be capable of improving course practices to improve their experience. It seems to me that there is a danger is that the real responsibility for student retention often lies with the efforts of a few (institutional) support staff. A remedial approach may still exist within courses where students are sent away from the course to be 'cured', when ironically it appears that it is the course

environment itself that acts as the greatest 'pull' force. This approach does not go far enough, and it is clear that responsibility should be dispersed as a matter of institutional strategy, for example, through course tutors, the sense of accountability represented by course annual monitoring statements, and staff development, to improve the experience of all students and encourage persistence.

'Universities must move beyond the provision of add-on services and establish those conditions in within universities that promote the retention of all, not just some, students.'
(Tinto, 2003, p.2)

There is need to recognise and proactively act upon the issues affecting our students, to move beyond flawed practices of identifying 'at risk' students and look to 'at risk' practices, particularly at course level. We must remember the student experience is essentially plural in nature, encompassing both the social and academic environments of the course and institution, as well as the external communities and commitments which students remain a part of. If we can guide students in negotiating these alien environments, and help them clarify and work towards their personal and individual goals, then we will encourage persistence.

As Coleridge wrote in 1828:

'The dwarf sees farther than the giant, when he has the giant's shoulder to mount on.'
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1828) *The Friend*

Withdrawal is not pre-determined.

The responsibility for persistence is ours.

7 References

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8 Appendix

- A: Retention & Progression statistics
- B: Student Headcount
- C: Institutional & BA Photography student demographic
- D: **Survey 1:** Student Experience questionnaire
- E: **Survey 2:** Pre-entry Level 1 student questionnaire
- F: **Survey 3:** On-course, Level 1, BA Photography student experience questionnaire
- G: Preliminary coding
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- I: Ethics
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- K: Reflections on tutor/researcher 'insider' status
- L: BA Photography Self, Peer & Tutor Essay Assessment pro-forma
- M: The scale & nature of student doubting
- N: The role of 'people' in the persistence process
- O: Change & Confidence Levels of BA Photography student at February mid-semester point
- P: Motivation & the reasons for entering Higher Education, the institution & course
- Q: Evaluation of a pre-entry online 'chat-room' for new students

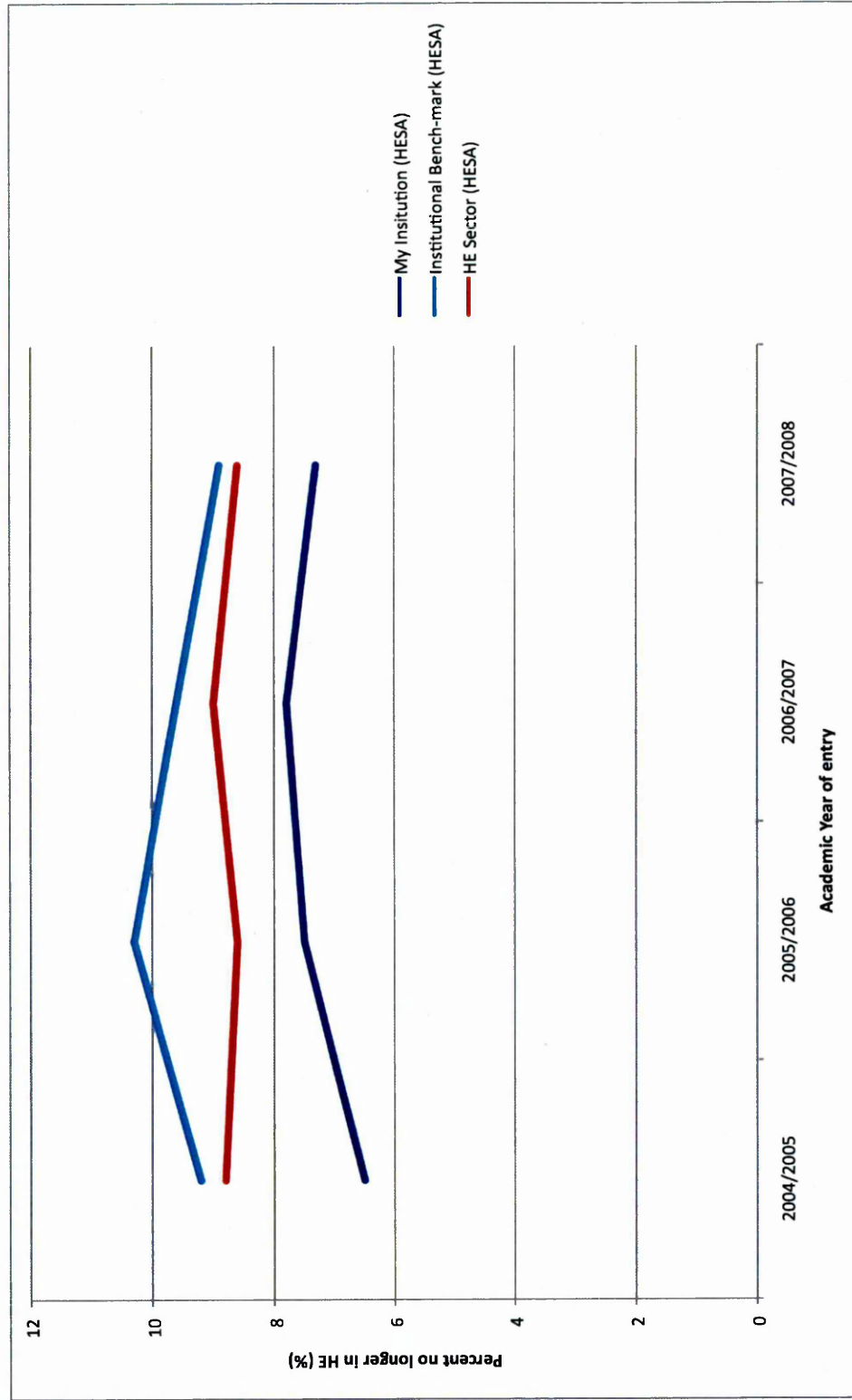
Appendix A

Retention & Progression statistics

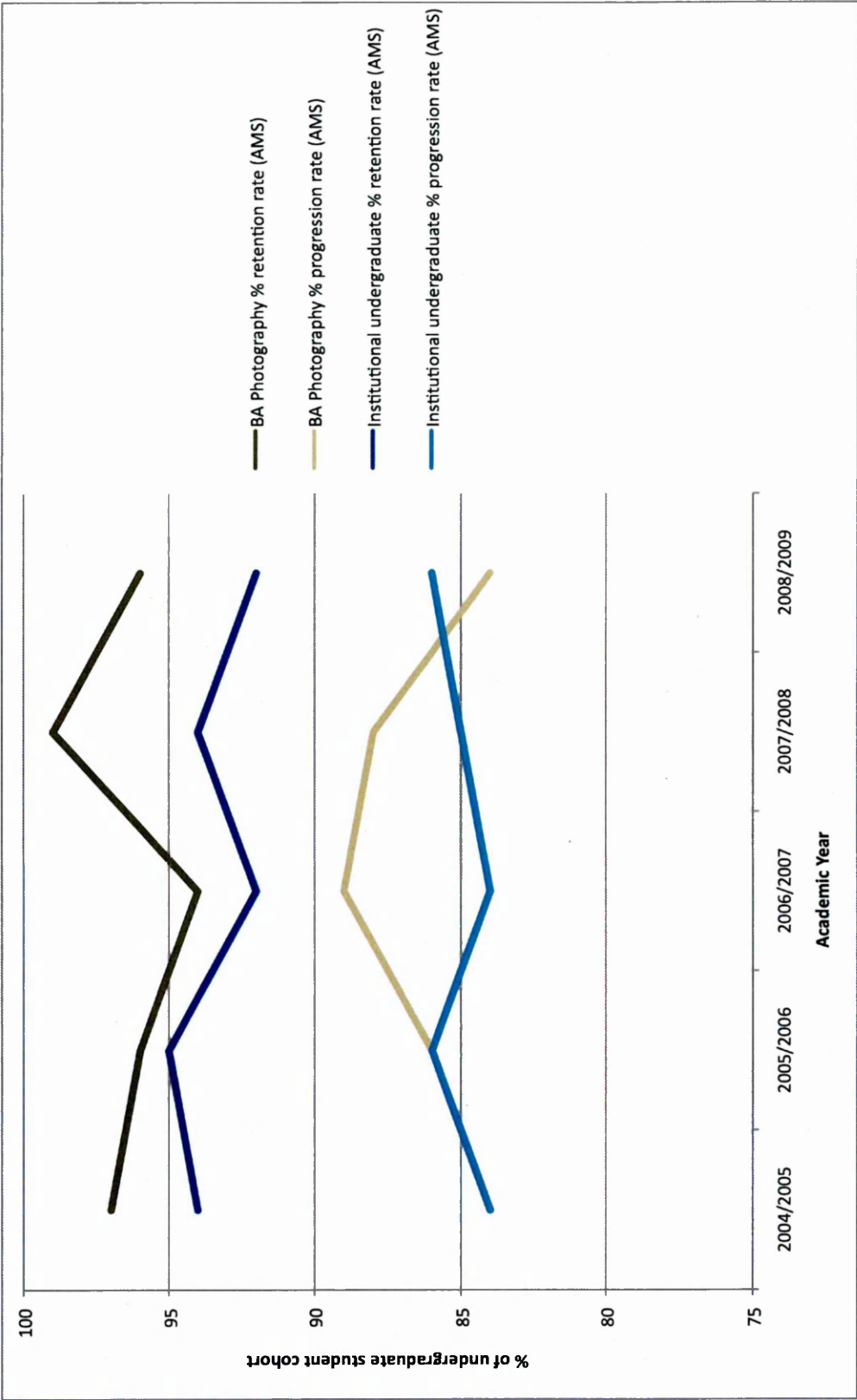
- Figure 9** **Non-continuation of Full-time first-degree entrants at my HEI and within the UK sector showing percent no longer in HE following year of entry (HESA, 2010)**
- Figure 10** **Institutional & BA Photography Retention rate (enrolled & did not leave) and Progression rate (successfully completed Level of study) of the total undergraduate population (Institutional AMS)**
- Figure 11** **Institutional & BA Photography retention (enrolled & did not leave) rates of the total undergraduate population (Annual Monitoring Statements: AMS)**
- Figure 12** **Full-time first-degree entrants at my HEI and within the UK sector who continue or qualify at same HEI (HESA [WWW] 2010)**
- Figure 13** **Non-continuation of Full-time first-degree entrants, at my HEI and within the UK HE sector; showing percent of students who transfer to a different HEI following year of entry (HESA, 2010)**

Appendix A:

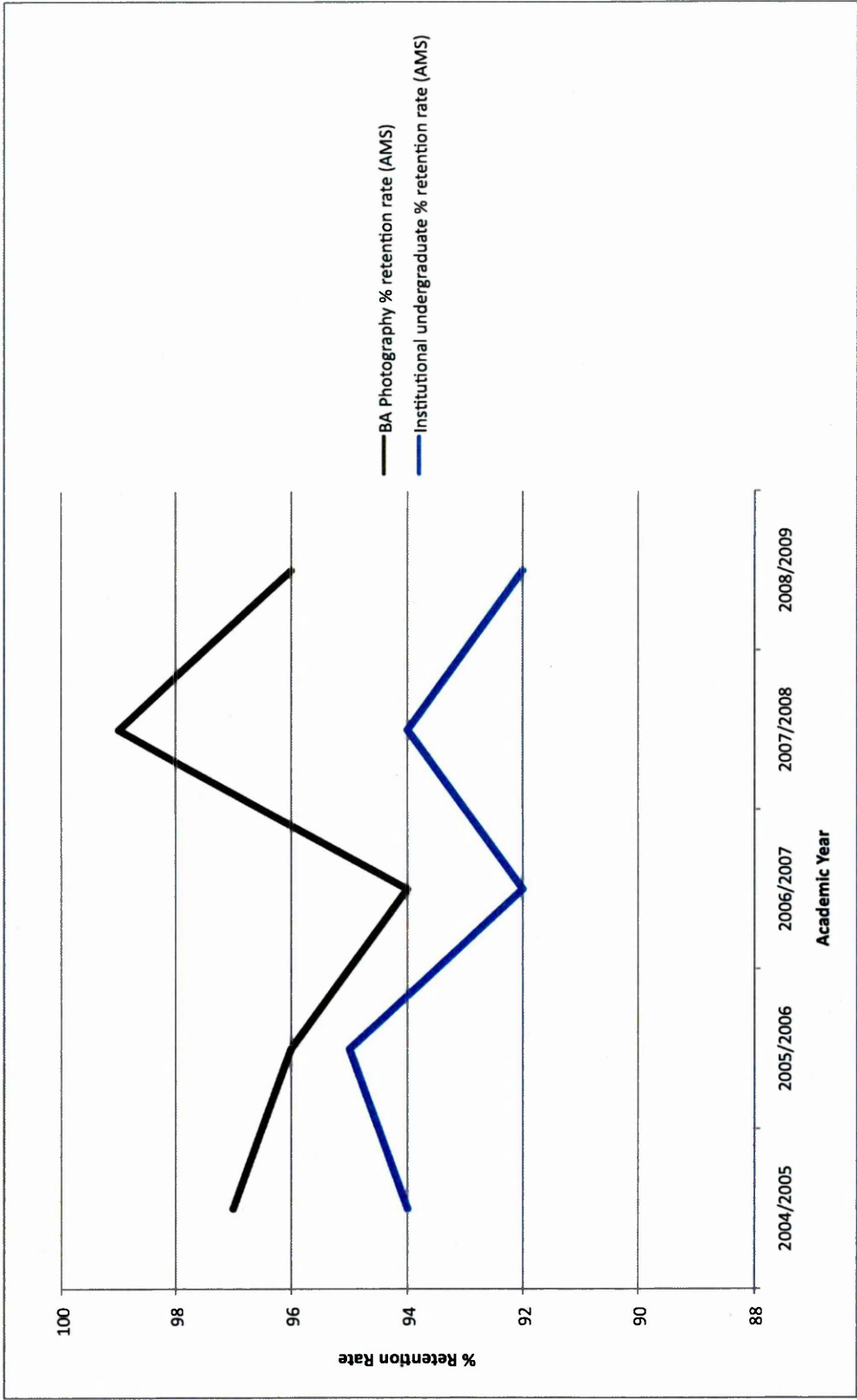
Figure 9 Non-continuation of Full-time first-degree entrants at my HEI and within the UK sector showing percent no longer in HE following year of entry (HESA, 2010)



Appendix A:
Figure 10 Institutional & BA Photography Retention rate (enrolled & did not leave) and Progression rate (successfully completed Level of study) of the total undergraduate population (Institutional AMS)

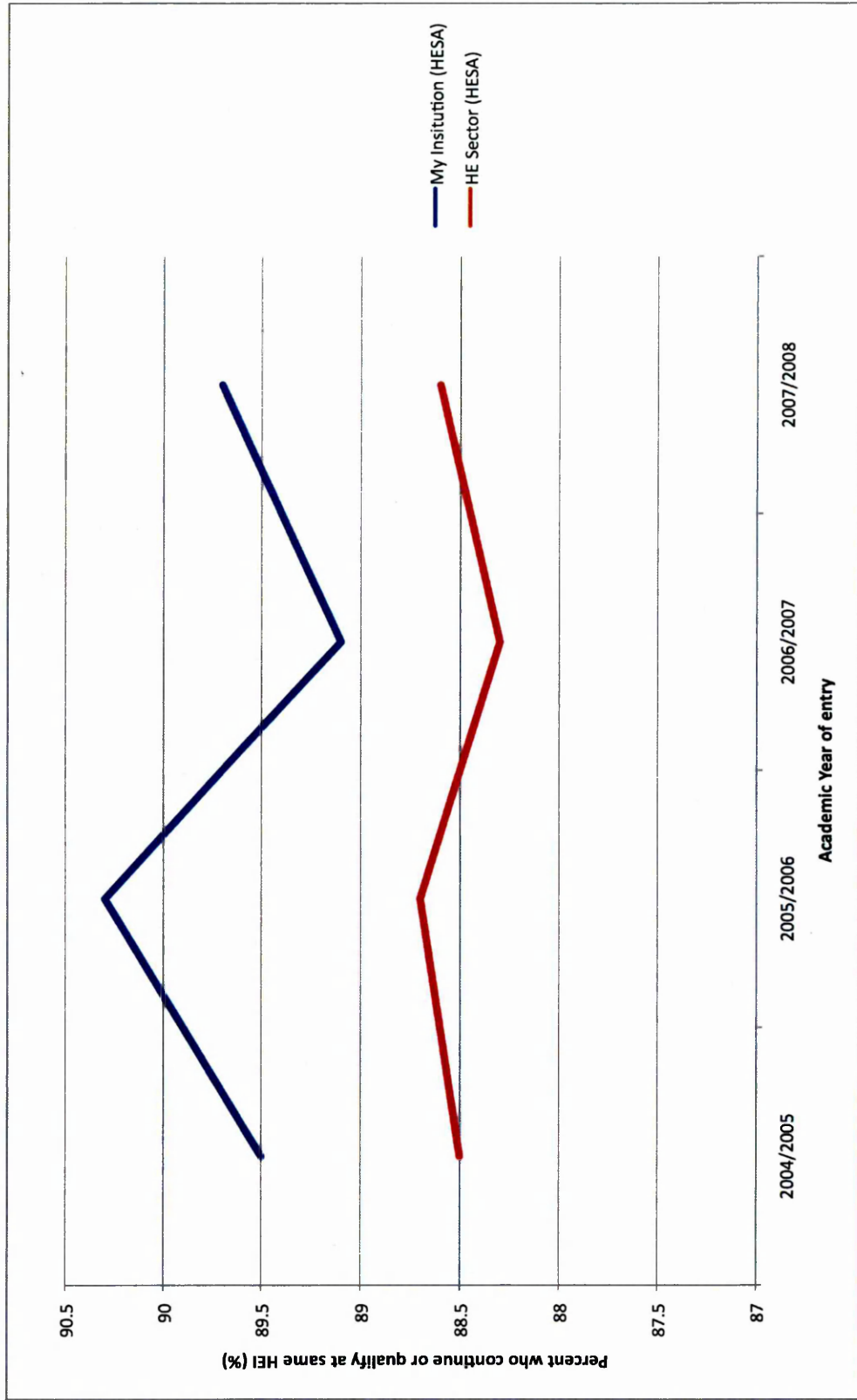


Appendix A:
Figure 11 Institutional & BA Photography retention (enrolled & did not leave) rates of the total undergraduate population
(Annual Monitoring Statements: AMS)



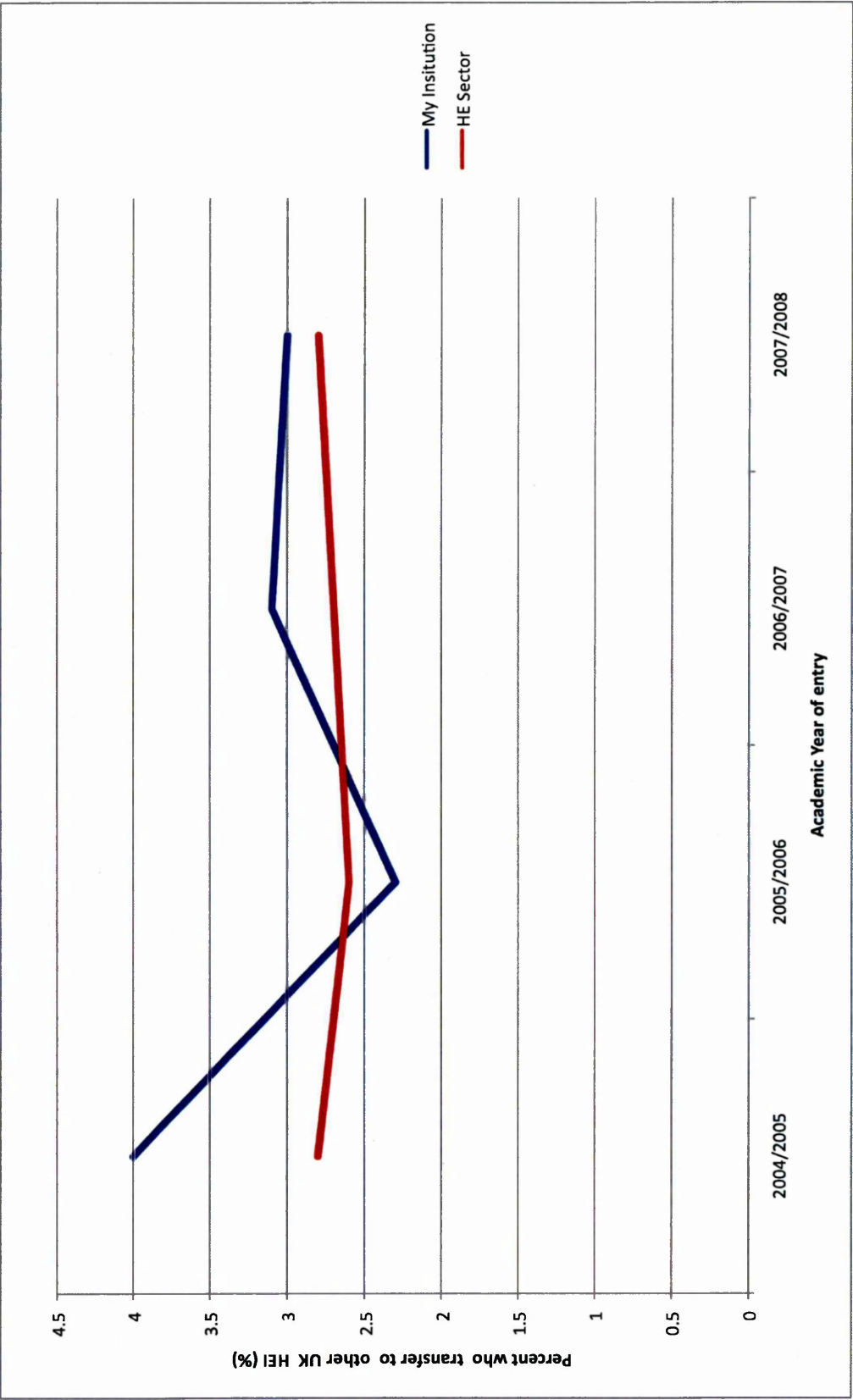
Appendix A:

Figure 12 Full-time first-degree entrants at my HEI and within the UK sector who continue or qualify at same HEI (HESA, 2010)



Appendix A:

Figure 13 Non-continuation of Full-time first-degree entrants, at my HEI and within the UK HE sector; showing percent of students who transfer to a different HEI following year of entry (HESA, 2010)



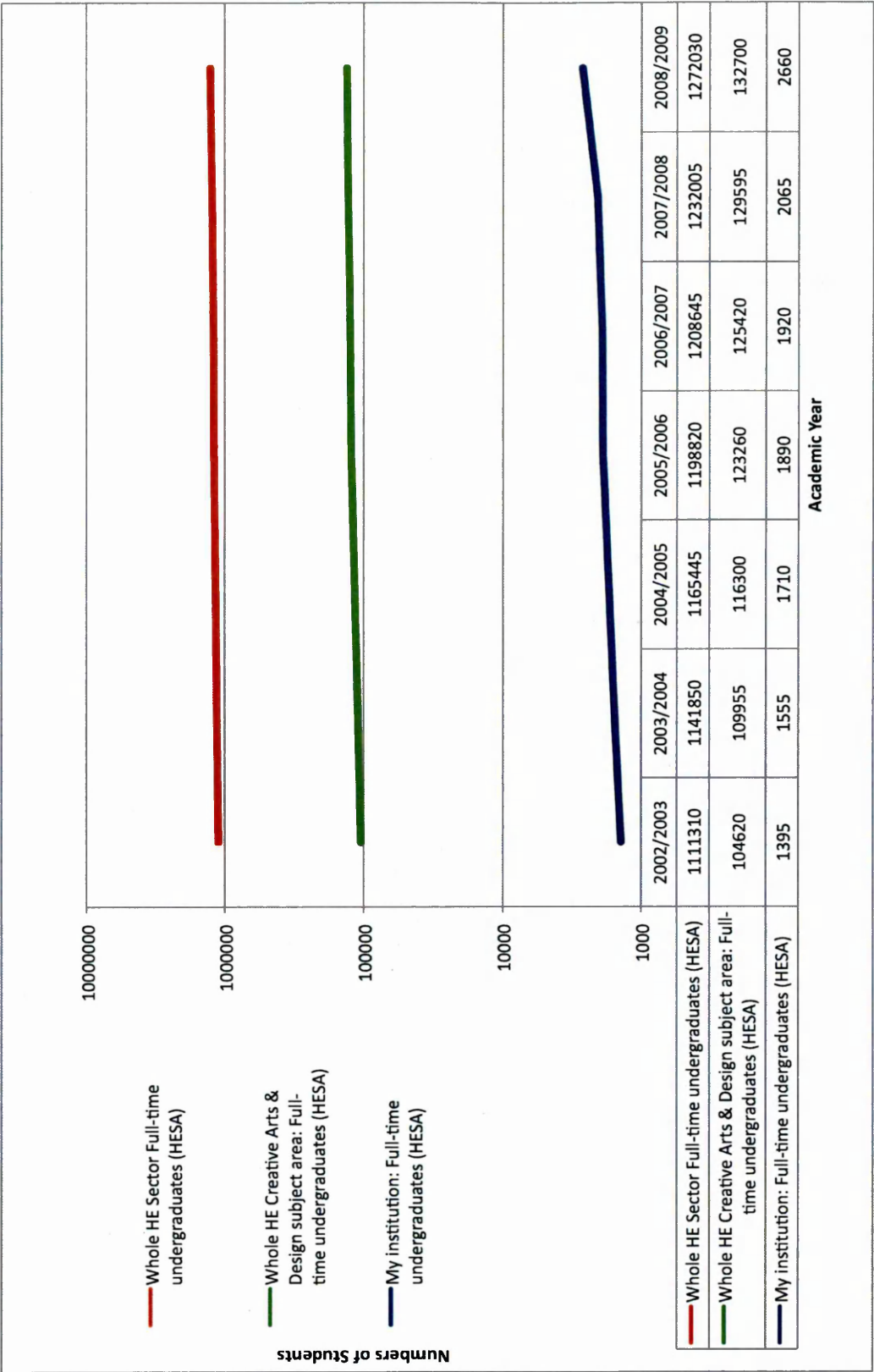
Appendix B

Student Headcount

Figure 14 Numbers of all full time undergraduates at my HEI, within the Creative Arts and Design subject area & the total UK undergraduate population (HESA, 2010)

Appendix B

Figure 14 Numbers of all full time undergraduates at my HEI, within the Creative Arts and Design subject area & the total UK undergraduate population (HESA, 2010)



Appendix C

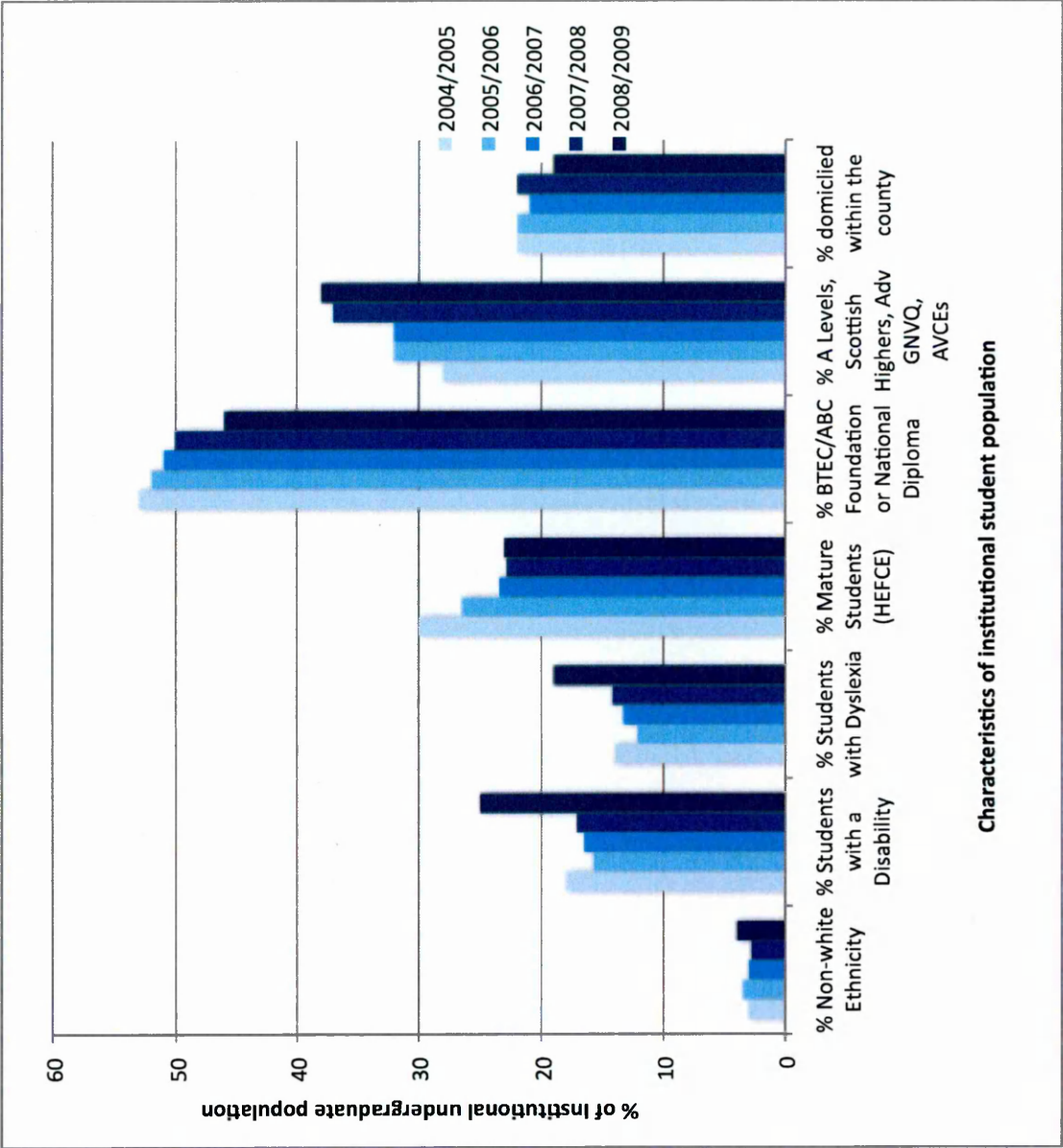
Institutional & BA Photography student demographic

Figure 15 % of student characteristics relating to ethnicity, disability, age, prior qualification and county of domicile held by the Institutional population as a whole (Institutional Annual Monitoring Statements)

Figure 16 % of student characteristics relating to ethnicity, disability, age, prior qualification and county of domicile held by BA Photography students (Institutional Annual Monitoring Statements)

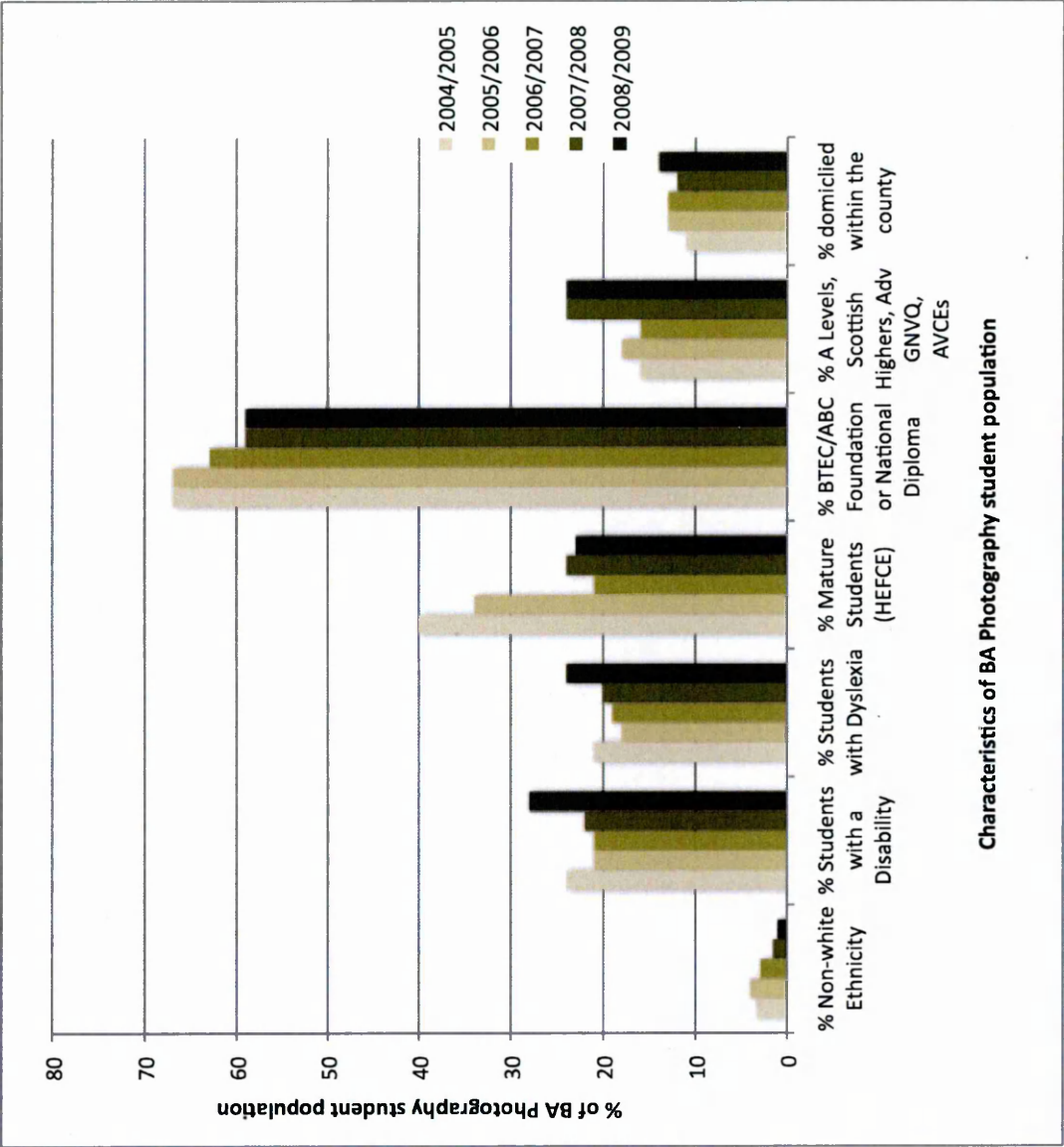
Appendix C:

Figure 15 % of student characteristics relating to ethnicity, disability, age, prior qualification and county of domicile held by the Institutional population as a whole (Institutional Annual Monitoring Statements)



Appendix C:

Figure 16 % of student characteristics relating to ethnicity, disability, age, prior qualification and county of domicile held by BA Photography students (Institutional Annual Monitoring Statements)



Appendix D

Survey 1: Student experience questionnaire

Delivery:	June 2007
Sample:	Total population of 83, Level 1, student mentors (2006 entry) from all undergraduate courses
Response Rate:	83% (=69)

Appendix D

Survey 1: Student experience questionnaire

Delivered in June 2007

Name (voluntary)

Course

Level

Age

Did you ever consider leaving your course/the College?

Yes (go to question 1)

No (go to question 5)

1. Did you consider leaving more than once?

2. Are you still considering leaving?

3. When did you consider leaving?

4. Why did you consider leaving? (go to question 6)

5. Why did you never consider leaving? (go to question 6)
6. What factors do you think convinced you to stay and complete the year?
7. What were the most important of these?
- 8 Why?
- 9 Are you interested in taking part in a focus group to further discuss this?
10. Do you have any further comments about your level 1 experience?

Appendix E

Survey 2: Pre-entry Level 1 student questionnaire

Delivery:	September 2007
Sample:	Total population of 822 incoming Level 1 students from all undergraduate courses, which included the total BA Photography cohort of 81 students

Response Rate:	Institutional:	27% (n=225)
	BA Photography:	37% (n=30)

Delivery:	September 2008
Sample:	Total population of 74 incoming Level 1 BA Photography students
Response Rate:	49% (n=36)

Delivery:	September 2009
Sample:	Total population of 90 incoming Level 1 BA Photography students
Response Rate:	67% (n=60)

Modifications to the questionnaire

- **2007 delivery** (Incoming Level 1 students (2007 entry): all undergraduate courses)
- **2008 delivery** (Incoming Level 1 students (2008 entry): BA Photography only)
Modifications involved additional questions regarding Level 1 residential status and invited students to evaluate an institutional pre-entry online chat-room. This was delivered via e-mail to BA Photography students only.
- **2009 delivery** (Incoming Level 1 students (2009 entry): BA Photography only)

Modifications involved additional questions regarding BA Photography students' confidence levels on a number of academic skills, both generic (e.g. essay writing) & photographically specific (e.g. black & white printing skills).

Appendix E

Survey 2: Pre-entry Level 1 student questionnaire
Delivered in September 2007, 2008 & 2009

A big hello to BA Photography

This questionnaire aims to improve the BA Photography course and better understand your needs, and will be used as part of my doctoral study into the student experience. Participation in this study is voluntary and all information you disclose will be treated confidentially and you will be anonymous in the research process. This research adheres to the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Ethical Guidelines (2004).

By completing this questionnaire you are giving your consent under the Data Protection Act (1988) for this information to be held on file. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, and all information is strictly confidential, I am interested in your own thoughts, whether they are academic, personal, social or practical. Please provide as much information as you like and try to be as honest as you can. If you have any questions please don't hesitate to contact me [contact details](#)

Steph Cosgrove
Lecturer: BA Photography/Educational Development

Firstly, please tell us about yourself.

Name:

Course:

E-mail:

Phone: Age: (on 1st September 2009)

Living in: ☐ Halls of Residence ☐ At home ☐ Private Student Accommodation ☐ Other

For the following questions, please order your answers from 1 (most important) to 3 (less important).

Why did you decide to study in Higher Education?

1 2 3

Why did you choose to study at [institution](#)?

1 2 3

Why did you choose Photography as a subject area?

1 2 3

I am most confident about:

1 2 3

I am least confident about:

1 2 3

I am most looking forward to:

1 2 3

I am least looking forward to:

1 2 3

How motivated do you feel at the moment in relation to the BA Photography course?

☐ Very ☐ Quite ☐ Not very

What keeps you going/helps you maintain your motivation in your studies?

.....

What de-motivates you in your studies?

.....

Now please tell us about your previous course of study.

Course (s):

School/college:

The best things about my previous course were:

1 2 3

The worst things about my previous course were:

1 2 3

How similar do you expect the BA Photography course will be to your previous education?

☐ Very ☐ A little ☐ Not very ☐ Not at all ☐ Don't know

Why?/Why not?

Finally, please tell us about your expectations of coming to study here at Institution.

How much information do you feel you had about:

Higher Education in general	<input type="checkbox"/> A lot	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Not enough
Institution	<input type="checkbox"/> A lot	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Not enough
BA Photography	<input type="checkbox"/> A lot	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Not enough

Who/where did you get this information from?

Does anyone in your immediate family have a degree?

☐ Father ☐ Mother ☐ Brother/Sister

What are your main expectations of:

Higher Education

Institution

BA Photography

Do you think you will complete your course in 3 years? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

Was there anything you really wanted to know but couldn't find out?

.....
Overall, do you feel prepared for university?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

Why?

Did you use the pre-entry chat-room web address?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Did you find it useful?

How confident are you on the following?:

Black and white photographic printing	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Quite Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very Confident
Using a 35mm camera	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Quite Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very Confident
Sketchbooks & research	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Quite Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very Confident
Digital photography and Photoshop	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Quite Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very Confident
Writing essays	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Quite Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very Confident
Presentations	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Quite Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very Confident
Group work	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Quite Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very Confident
Independent study	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Quite Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very Confident
Self motivation	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Quite Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very Confident
Speaking out in class	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Quite Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Not very Confident

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

Appendix F

Survey 3: On-course, Level 1, BA Photography student experience questionnaire

Delivery:	February 2008
Sample:	Total BA Photography Level 1 cohort = 77 Total BA Photography Level 1 students present at time of delivery = 59
Response Rate:	Of total cohort: 53% Of students present: 69% (n=41)

Delivery:	February 2009
Sample:	Total BA Photography Level 1 cohort = 74 Total BA Photography Level 1 students present at time of delivery = 68
Response Rate:	Of total cohort: 74% Of students present: 81% (n=55)

Modifications to the questionnaire

- 2009 delivery (Incoming Level 1 students (2009 entry): BA Photography only)
Modifications involved additional questions regarding level 1 student 'doubting'

Appendix F

Survey 3: On course Level 1 student experience questionnaire
Delivered in February 2008 & 2009

BA Photography

This research explores the student experience on BA Photography at institution; with a view to improving the way the course supports students. Students' views are vital to understand your needs, so I hope you will want to contribute; as this questionnaire is voluntary!!!

This survey questionnaire is part of my doctoral study into the student experience on our course; BA Photography; but is also part of a larger institutional aim, to improve your (and all students!) experience at institution

Participation in this study is voluntary and all information you disclose will be treated confidentially. You will be anonymous in the research process.

This research adheres to the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Ethical Guidelines (2004). By completing this questionnaire you are giving your consent under the Data Protection Act (1988) for this information to be held on file.

Please remember that giving your name is voluntary!

If you have any questions; want to see the results of research; and/or find out more, please don't hesitate to contact me on
Contact details

Many thanks,
Steph

Name: (voluntary).....

in general...

Please circle:

Have you ever thought about leaving the course?	Yes	No
Have you thought about leaving more than once?	Yes	No
Are you still thinking about leaving?	Yes	No
When did you think about leaving?	Month	
Why did you think about leaving?		
What factors encouraged you to stay?		
What was the most important of these?		

Do you feel confident on the course at the moment?

Yes Maybe No

Have you always felt confident on the course?

Yes Maybe No

Maybe/No: go to 1

Yes: go to 2

1 What made you feel more confident?

2 Why do you think you always felt confident?

3 What's been the easiest thing so far? Why?

4 What's been the most difficult thing so far? Why?

5 How did you overcome this difficulty?

before you came...

6 What were you most worried about before you came and why?

7 Are you still worried about it?

Yes No

8 (Why/Why not?)

the course...

7 How is the course similar and different to your previous educational experiences?

Previous
course.....

Similarities:

Differences:

8 How is the course similar and different to **what you expected** it to be?

I expected.....

I didn't expect..... (and what did you do about this?)

me...

9 In 5 years time I want to be.....
The course is meeting my personal goals Yes Maybe No

I think the **most relevant** things for me on the course are...

I think the **least relevant** things for me on the course are...

10 How do you motivate yourself on the course?

11 What aspects motivate you most? (and why?)

12 What aspects motivate you least? (and why?)

13 Do you think you've changed since you arrived in October? Yes Maybe No
Why and/or why not?

14 I usually think I can succeed at something Yes Maybe No

15 How important are the following items to you?

	Very important to me	Quite important to me	A little important to me	Not important to me
Getting good grades				
Developing my knowledge				
Developing my practical skills				
Not failing anything				
Being better than other people				
Getting a degree				
Learning new things				
Being a photographer				
Learning things I'm interested in				
Being with people like me				
Better career prospects				
Being at uni in general				
Being at institution				

17 The best thing that has happened to me since starting the course overall is....

18 The worst thing that happened to me since starting the course overall is...

19 How did you cope with this?

20 The most important thing to me in out of everything in general is.....(and why?)

Appendix G

Preliminary Coding

Table 3	Preliminary coding of Survey 1 & Focus Group 1: Academic, Social & Individual Forces
Table 4	Preliminary coding of the question: ‘What factors do you think convinced you to stay and complete the year? (Survey 1: Question 6) (Level 1: Student mentor response rate to the question: 91%)
Table 5	Coding of the question ‘ What was the most important of these? [factors encouraging persistence] (Survey 1: Question 7) (Level 1: Student mentor response rate to the question: 78%)
Table 6	Coding of pre-entry Survey 2 (2007, 2008, 2009) using the same concepts that distinguish between generic institutional and specific course environments

Appendix G

Table 3 Preliminary coding of Survey 1 & Focus Group 1: Academic, Social & Individual Forces

Concept	Example Categories	Example Response Survey 1 [QUAN]	Example Response Focus Group 1 [QUAL]
Academic	Course, tutor, subject	<i>'The course programme and fellow students'</i>	<i>'It was the theories and things like Barthes and all that sort of stuff that got me reinvigorated'</i>
Social	Friends, atmosphere, people, peers, location	<i>'I've made very good friends now. I love the culture, people and atmosphere. Here everyone is very friendly'</i>	<i>'Yeah well, my sort of best friends, you could call them, or my closest friends are definitely are not on the course, they're not photography students. I think I've got all of my mates from people who weren't actually on the course'</i>
Individual	Age, finance, motivation, family, goals, confidence, personal determination	<i>'I like being a student. I couldn't afford to leave'</i>	<i>'....someone could be lazy and just walk right by.....' 'Or be really nervous about the criticism they might get. They won't realize until they actually do it a few times that it actually helps'</i>

Appendix G

Table 4 Preliminary coding of the question: 'What factors do you think convinced you to stay and complete the year? (Survey 1: Question 6)
(Level 1: Student mentor response rate to the question: 91%)

Broad code	Example of factors cited	Example response	% response of usable sample (n=63)
Academic only	Course	<i>'good course'</i> <i>'there wasn't a practical enough [subject] course to attend'</i> <i>'the promise of better content in future units'</i>	10%
Social only	Friends, atmosphere, people, peers, location	<i>'I've made very good friends now. I love the culture, people and atmosphere. Here everyone is very friendly'</i> <i>'I think that it was probably because of friends and support'</i>	8%
Individual only	Self confidence, motivation, finance, family, time	<i>'The longer I stayed the more comfortable I felt at uni'</i> <i>'I like being a student. I couldn't afford to leave'</i> <i>'I decided to give it till next December then I have to decide on a job offer, it would be a waste of a year otherwise'</i>	5%
Academic & Social	Course, location, friends, people, peers, tutors, other staff,	<i>'The quality of the course was good.'</i> <i>'The niceness of the people – course mates and tutors'</i> <i>'Location, lifestyle, friends, liked my course'</i> <i>Already settle down with friends. Friendly people in university</i>	52%
Academic & Individual	Course, learning, finance, self motivation, personal goals, other staff, time	<i>'Determination. Love the course'</i> <i>'Because the course is really good, and I'm learning many new things, new techniques and uses of media'</i> <i>'Money spent on course. Course reputation. Hassle of changing. The idea that it will get better over time'</i>	8%
Social & Individual	Friends, personal motivation, location, peers, people, family	<i>'My friends, my family, my personal determination and ambition'</i> <i>'Determination and patterns of quitting becoming apparent and mentor encouragement'</i> <i>'Reminding myself that I really did want to study [subject] here and it would be difficult anywhere. Finally making friends helped tremendously'</i>	6%
Academic, Social & Individual		<i>'Good friends, good tutors, family etc'</i> <i>'Aspects of the course. Getting a job and social life outside of uni'</i> <i>'I love . I love the course, the facilities, the people. At the end of the day I WANT this degree and I am pushing for resolution with my financial issues! It'd be letting go of too much to leave'</i>	11%

Appendix G

Table 5 Coding of the question 'What was the most important of these?'
[factors encouraging persistence] (Survey 1: Question 7)

(Level 1: Student mentor response rate to the question: 78%)

Broad code	Example of factors cited	Example response	% response of usable sample (n=54)
Subject	Course, tutors,	<i>'Enjoyment of the course'</i> <i>'Tuition from tutors'</i> <i>The quality of the course'</i>	20%
Peer	Friends, 'people', mentor	<i>The support I had from people the energy, motivation and dedication of those around me'</i> <i>'My friends and my mentor'</i> <i>'Good friends. Help and support provided'</i>	30%
Individual	Family, self motivation, self confidence, time location/lifestyle, finance	<i>'Knowing that I have quit things before rather than giving it time'</i> <i>'I cant afford to start again'</i> <i>'Location and lifestyle'</i> <i>'Family and personal determination'</i>	20%
Subject & peer	Course, people, friends, mentor, tutor	<i>'The course and having some friends'</i> <i>'Making friends and immersing myself in my course'</i> <i>'The course programme and fellow students'</i>	13%
Subject & individual	Course, environment	<i>'happy with course/happy with environment'</i>	2%
Multiple		<i>'All of it'</i> <i>'All of these factors working in synergy are all equally important'</i> <i>'I think all equally as important as each other'</i>	15%

Appendix G

Table 6 Coding of pre-entry Survey 2 (2007, 2008, 2009) using the same concepts that distinguish between generic institutional and specific course environments

Coding	Example response: Best thing about previous course	Example response: Most looking forward to in HE	Example response: Factors which help motivate
Academic - institutional	'Facilities', 'music studios', the 'books', 'studio space'	'The facilities'	'Support', 'getting help and given confidence', 'books'
Academic - course	'Practical lessons in the studio', 'discussion', 'freedom within the briefs', 'tiny class', 'hands on approach', 'best tutors', 'learning', 'fast pace'	'Script writing', 'learning new things', 'my course', 'studying', 'topics studied'	'Doing it and getting a positive response from tutors', 'inspirational lecturers who inspire and encourage me', 'Enjoyment of the subject, task, learning interesting new things', 'enthusiastic lecturers', 'feedback', 'if there's change I like doing something different most days'
Social - course	'Fellow students', 'other students on the course',	'Meeting the rest of my course'	'Looking at the work and motivation of others', 'stimulation by seeing others work', 'need to prove myself and being acknowledged by peers', 'talking to others on my course', 'people around me (classmates)' 'looking at other students work can give you ideas/make you work harder'
Social - institutional	'New people', 'friends', 'nice people', 'inspiring people',	'Living with students', 'meeting new people' 'social life', 'moving in day – meeting my new room-mates',	'Other people', 'inspiring environment of friends', 'social life', 'friends', 'happy fun people', 'people to talk to about interests'
Institutional Contextual factors	'Atmosphere', 'friendly environment',	'Everything has to offer', 'living near a beach',	'Being part of a creative environment',
Individual contextual factors	'Personal development', 'getting into uni', 'post A-Level frame of mind',	'The challenge', 'starting afresh', 'the uni experience', 'independence', 'opportunity', 'having fun'	'Will power', 'my son', 'my own determination', 'knowing it will help me in the future', 'new challenges' 'desire to achieve my highest', 'eventual goals',
Vague or jocular	'The experience', 'they [A-Levels] only lasted 2 years,' 'none'	'Everything', 'the experience, first year'	'A mixture of sugar, caffeine and alcohol in that order', 'n/a', 'rescue remedy', 'certain

remarks			<i>dates in time'</i>
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Appendix H

Survey 4: On-course, Level 1, BA Photography student course evaluation

Delivery:	February 2008
Sample:	Total BA Photography Level 1 cohort = 77 Total BA Photography Level 1 students present at time of delivery = 59
Response Rate:	Of total cohort: 53% Of students present: 69% (n=41)

Appendix H

Survey 4: On course Level 1 student course evaluation
Delivered in February 2008

BA (Hons) Photography: Level 1

Name (voluntary).....

	STRENGTHS (positive aspects)	WEAKNESSES (negative aspects)
	1	1
The Course		
Please comment on the following areas with regard to:		
1) <i>revelance</i>		
2) <i>personal interest</i>		
3) <i>personal satisfaction</i>	2	2
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Structure• Workshops/presentations• Project brief themes• Subject content e.g. HACS, Photographic Practice.• Visiting Lecturers• Essays		
	3	3
	4	4
	5	5

Teaching,
Learning
& Assessment

Please comment on the
following areas with regard to:

- 4) *revelance*
- 5) *personal interest*
- 6) *personal satisfaction*

- Photo inductions
- Photo Workshops
- Staff
- Lectures and Presentations
- Tutorials (group & individual)
- Assessment process (Feb 08)
- Feedback (written/verbal)

1

1

2

2

3

3

4

4

5

5

1

1

Resources

Please comment on things like...

- Photo studios
 - Darkrooms
 - IT facilities
 - Support staff
 - Library
 - English support
 - Student services
 - Accommodation
- 2
- 2

3

3

4

4

5

5



Appendix I

Ethics

Student research consent form

Human Participants & Materials Ethics Committee Proforma

Appendix I

Research Consent Form

Name of research participant

Date

You have been invited to take part in this research to explore your experiences as a student on the BA Photography course. This study particularly aims to investigate your persistence within the BA Photography course and seeks to evaluate and improve institutional practices in order to better support students. Your participation will contribute towards my doctoral study with the Open University. This interview will aim to explore aspects of your experiences with **institution and the BA Photography course, both socially and academically, though do feel free to add any other information you feel is relevant to our discussion. You will be anonymous in the research process; both by name and by any information you provide which might identify you to a third party.**

(Please tick each statement to indicate you agree with it)

- ☐ The purpose of this research has been explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand the intent of this research and voluntarily agree to participate.
- ☐ If at any time I wish to stop the interview I understand that I may do so, I know that I am not expected to answer any questions I feel uncomfortable with.
- ☐ I know that this interview will be semi structured and last for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. I agree that this interview may be recorded.
- ☐ I understand that any information that I provide will be treated confidentially and I will be anonymous in the research process, and all steps will be taken, so that my identity will only be known to the researcher (Steph Cosgrove). Other members of BA Photography staff will not have access to notes, transcripts or any other information that I provide.
- ☐ I will be provided with a copy of the typed transcript and have the opportunity to comment on accuracy and provide additional comments.

- ☐ I know I can withdraw from this research at any time and that none of the information I provide in this interview will be used.
- ☐ I agree that the information that I provide can be used for educational or research purposes, including publication.
- ☐ I know that if I have any further questions or concerns I can contact Steph Cosgrove via **contact details**

Signature

Interviewer signature

HUMAN PARTICIPANTS AND MATERIALS ETHICS COMMITTEE (HPMEC) PROFORMA

Appendix I

Human Participants & Materials Ethics Committee Proforma

Please complete and send to:

John Oates (j.m.oates@open.ac.uk), Chair,
Human Participants Materials Ethics Committee (HPMEC)
Centre for Childhood Development and Learning (CHDL),
Briggs, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes
Also send a copy to Research-ethics@open.ac.uk

If you have any queries before you fill in this form please look at the
Research Ethics (intranet) web site: <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/>

Title of project

A short, descriptive title.

Why do BA Photography students persist in their studies? A case study at a small specialist rural institution

Schedule

Time frame for the research and its data collection phase(s).

This is a multi method research design aiming for thesis completion in October 2010. Data collection will take place in sequential waves with voluntary survey instruments being delivered to Level 1 BA Photography students (via email) each September prior to enrolment (2007, 2008, 2009) and an on-course questionnaire being delivered to the same Level 1 cohort in the subsequent February of thier Level 1 study (2008, 2009). Alongside these data collection instruments will be a number of individual semi structured interviews, and a small number of focus groups, each expected to last around an hour, with voluntary participants from all Levels of study on the BA Photography course.

Abstract

A summary of the main points of the research, understandable by a non-specialist.

This research is a situated case study that investigates student persistence on a single undergraduate course (BA Photography) within a single institution. I aim to

contextualise the nature of these decisions in terms of participants' internal characteristics (as discussed in the literature which often focuses on 'non traditional' students and retention) but to also incorporate other personal psychological attributes such as students' goals, motivations and levels of confidence, as also playing a role in the decision to persist. These will be explored against the backdrop of institutional practices (both at wide generic and course specific levels) with the explicit aim to better understand the challenges that students face, and be able to identify and disseminate good practices to support student success within the broader HE environment.

Source(s) of funding

Details of the external or internal funding body (e.g. ESRC, MRC).

n/a

Justification for research

What contribution to knowledge, policy, practice, and people's lives the research will make?

The UK literature is strongly orientated to exploring student 'retention' from institutional stakeholders perspectives, perhaps unsurprising, given the financial implications and political motivations of retaining an increasingly diverse body of students. However, I personally feel there is a danger that this orientation towards the 'at risk' characteristics of non-traditional students in terms of retention could create a discourse which suggests that the 'problem' with retention lies inherently within these individual students, rather than relating to existing institutional practices. This focus has the *potential* to encourage passivity to institutional change.

This study aims to explore firstly the persistence (rather than withdrawal) of BA Photography students in a small, specialist and rural art, design and media institution. This course and HEI has an excellent retention rate, compared with the HE sector. Also the literature (e.g. Yorke, 2002) suggests that withdrawal patterns differ in art & design contexts (with 'wrong course' being cited as a reason for withdrawal significantly less than other subject areas). Therefore there is potential for the HE sector to learn from art & design practices (e.g. management of expectations, application route) in order to better support students prior to entry. However within this the choice of subject (Photography) is relatable to more traditional subject areas (e.g. its status as potentially both a profession based or non-profession based subject).

Exploring persistence with the specific view to improving institutional practices and making and disseminating recommendations to the HE sector will not only enhance the student experience of my own BA Photography students, but hopefully that of other students within my HEI (and through several conference presentations already given as a result of this research), students in the wider HE sector.

Investigators

Give names and units of all persons involved in the collection and handling of individual

data. Please name one person as Principal Investigator (PI).

Steph Cosgrove

Published ethical guidelines to be followed

For example: BERA, BPS, BSA (see Research Ethics web site for more information).

British Educational Research Association
British Sociological Association

Location(s) of data collection

Give details of where and when data will be collected. If on private, corporate or institutional premises, indicate what approvals are gained/required.

Data collection consists of 2 yearly voluntary surveys delivered to Level 1 BA Photography students. The first electronic survey (September prior to enrolment) will be delivered and collected via email, the second paper-based survey (February) will be delivered on campus during class time and collected later in the day. Individual interviews and focus groups will take place off campus (no formal approvals are required for this location). However institutional permission to undertake this research has been granted by the Director of Learning & Teaching and the Programme Leader of BA Photography.

Participants

Give details of the population from which you will be sampling and how this sampling will be done.

Voluntary survey respondents in the first 6 months of study involved Level 1 student mentors (invited to participate via presentation), and incoming Level 1 students from all 13 undergraduate courses at my HEI (invited to participate via postal questionnaire). Subsequently however, the research population has only included BA Photography students (from all 3 Levels of study). As this is an insider research context (I teach on the BA Photography course) I know this entire population of students personally, as well as having access to students group College e-mail addresses. However, as 'insider' research the voluntary nature of participation will be stressed at all times to avoid any sense of coercion. However as part of the Initial/Pilot study stage BA Photography focus group/interview participants responded that they were 'happy to help' also reporting they felt comfortable with the line of questioning, which suggests that students did not feel coerced due to my insider tutor role, and that the line of questioning was not distressing to participants. All participants are over 18 years of age. Initial sampling will be random as I evaluate the access I have in terms of voluntary consent and willingness to participate. Should my own students appear to be willing to participate, subsequent purposive sampling will aim to include BA Photography participants with a range of personal characteristics.

Recruitment procedures

How will you identify and approach potential participants?

As this is an insider research context I personally know the whole cohort of BA Photography students, the primary population within my research. These participants will be invited to participate via email and verbal presentations within class time. At no time will I approach an individual student, nor utilise a snowball approach to recruitment as this may lead to my own students feeling coerced into participation as a result of my insider role. Similarly, I will not target individual students to complete survey instruments should they choose not to participate as a result of whole cohort recruitment procedures such as emails and presentations, for example through personal follow up telephone calls etc.

Consent

Give details of how informed consent will be gained and attach copies of information sheet(s) and consent form(s). Give details of how participants can withdraw consent and what will happen to their data in such a case (see the Research Ethics web site for an advisory document).

Voluntary informed consent will be sought in both verbal form (and audio-recorded) as well as through the information/consent form attached. All BA Photography participants have the opportunity to ask questions about this study, as part of my yearly presentation regarding my research interests; as well as at recruitment and data collection stage. All interview participants will receive an electronic copy of the transcript and have the opportunity to make amendments, clarify statements and add additional information. Should a participant decide to withdraw from the research for any reason, their transcript will be deleted and will not be used in any subsequent written reports. As insider research in the event of a participant withdrawing their consent, it will be vitally important that this individual be assured that their withdrawal from the research will not cause prejudice in any way.

MODIFICATION: August 2010. Participants' consent will be renewed for specific quotes or any identifying comments used in the final thesis (prior to October 2010 submission) due to the potentially larger and public audience for this research.

Methodology

Outline the method(s) that will be employed to collect and analyse data.

This research strategy is multi-method in nature and will utilise both quantitative and qualitative cycles of data collection and analysis to unpick why BA Photography students persist in their studies. Data collection will include 2 yearly voluntary surveys delivered to the Level 1 BA Photography cohort in September and February, as well as ongoing focus groups and one-to-one interviews with BA Photography students from all Levels of study. The data from these surveys will be entered into a password protected Excel spreadsheet, coded and analysed to produce frequency counts that will inform subsequent in-depth interviews. The password-protected transcripts from

these interviews will be imported into an N.Vivo workbook and subsequently coded, with both suggestions from qualitative findings and the literature in mind. The conceptual approach taken is that student persistence decisions are a result of interactions between internal sociological and psychological characteristics and features of the generic institutional and course environments.

Data Protection

Give details of registration of the project under the DP Act and the procedures to be followed re: storage and disposal of data to comply with the Act.

This research has not been registered under the Data Protection Act, 1988. All responses given by research participants (to both surveys and interviews/focus groups) will be held electronically on a password-protected computer and within password-protected files. All paper and audio material will be shredded/deleted. The data held would be considered 'personal data' by the Information Commissioners Office as (although names have been changed in interview transcripts, and numbers assigned in survey data) it is possible that individuals may be identified through their responses and descriptions of their lived contexts. The Data Protection Act states that all individuals have a right to access personal data held about them, and all interview participants will be provided with transcripts of their responses. Respondents to survey instruments were invited to give their consent for such data to be held in the information provided to them at recruitment stage. No other people were given access to transcripts or survey responses and responses will only be used for the purposes of this educational research.

Recompense to participants

Normally, recompense is only given for expenses and inconvenience, otherwise it might be seen as coercion/inducement to participate. Give details of any recompense to participants.

No recompense will be given to research participants in line with Open University suggestions that this might place an additional obligation upon participants. This is particularly important in my own research context, as insider research, to avoid any sense of coercion with research participants who are also my own students. However, all interview and focus group participants were sent an email thanking them for their time and an electronic copy of the transcript provided for their clarification or modification. During interviews and focus groups refreshments were provided.

Deception

Give details of the withholding of any information from participants, or misrepresentation or other deception that is an integral part of the research. Any such deception should be fully justified.

There is no deception or withholding of information to research participants. All participants are given the opportunity to freely ask questions about the nature and current findings of the research.

Risks

Detail any foreseen risks to participants or researchers and steps that will be taken to minimise/counter these.

BERA specifically address the potential risks of insider research (as this study is) in that 'dual roles may also introduce explicit tensions in areas such as confidentiality and must be addressed accordingly' (British Educational Research Association, 2004, p.6) whilst the BSA recommends that '[Researchers] should be clear about the limits of their detachment from and involvement in their areas of study' (British Sociological Association, 2002, p.2). Therefore the main risks to my research participants (in that they are my own students) would relate to breaches of confidentiality, risks of coercion and the potential for emotional harm caused by discussion of potentially sensitive topics such as challenges that students may have faced over the course of their academic career. The voluntary nature of participation was stressed at all times, and all responses will be kept in password-protected files, with names changed (interviews) and numbers assigned (surveys). Any paper or audio documentation will be shredded/deleted. I will avoid timing interviews around assessment and early in academic year for Level 1 participants, to minimise the risk of coercion or misunderstanding between the purposes of research and the academic relationship I have with my own students. Similarly, should participants demonstrate any signs of distress as a result of discussing personal sensitive topics for example, I will cease the interview and step back into my tutor role to offer advice and guidance. Sensitive topics (such as personal reasons for doubting) will not be included in focus groups, as I do not wish participants to have to talk about potentially personal issues in this public setting.

Debriefing

Give details of how information will be given to participants after data collection to inform them of the purpose of their participation and the research more broadly.

All interview/focus group participants will be thanked for their time and sent an electronic copy of their interview transcript and given the opportunity to make comment, modifications or add further information. The opportunity to ask questions at any time in the research process will be stressed. Before submission of the final thesis all participants who have been quoted will be contacted and their consent sought for use (and context) or specific quotes/models used (which might render them identifiable). They will also be asked if they would like to view the final thesis, and be informed of the risks that other interview participants (i.e. other BA Photography students) may be able to identify them from the quotes used. Only if all interview participants understand this risk and agree will I make the final thesis available in full.

Declaration

Declare here that the research will conform to the above protocol and that any

significant changes or new issues will be raised with the HPMEC before they are implemented. A Final Report form will need to be filled in once the research has ended.

Signature(s)

Steph Cosgrove

(this can be the typed name(s) of investigator(s) if electronic copy is submitted (which is preferred))

Date

February 2009

**Proposed date for
final report**

October 2010

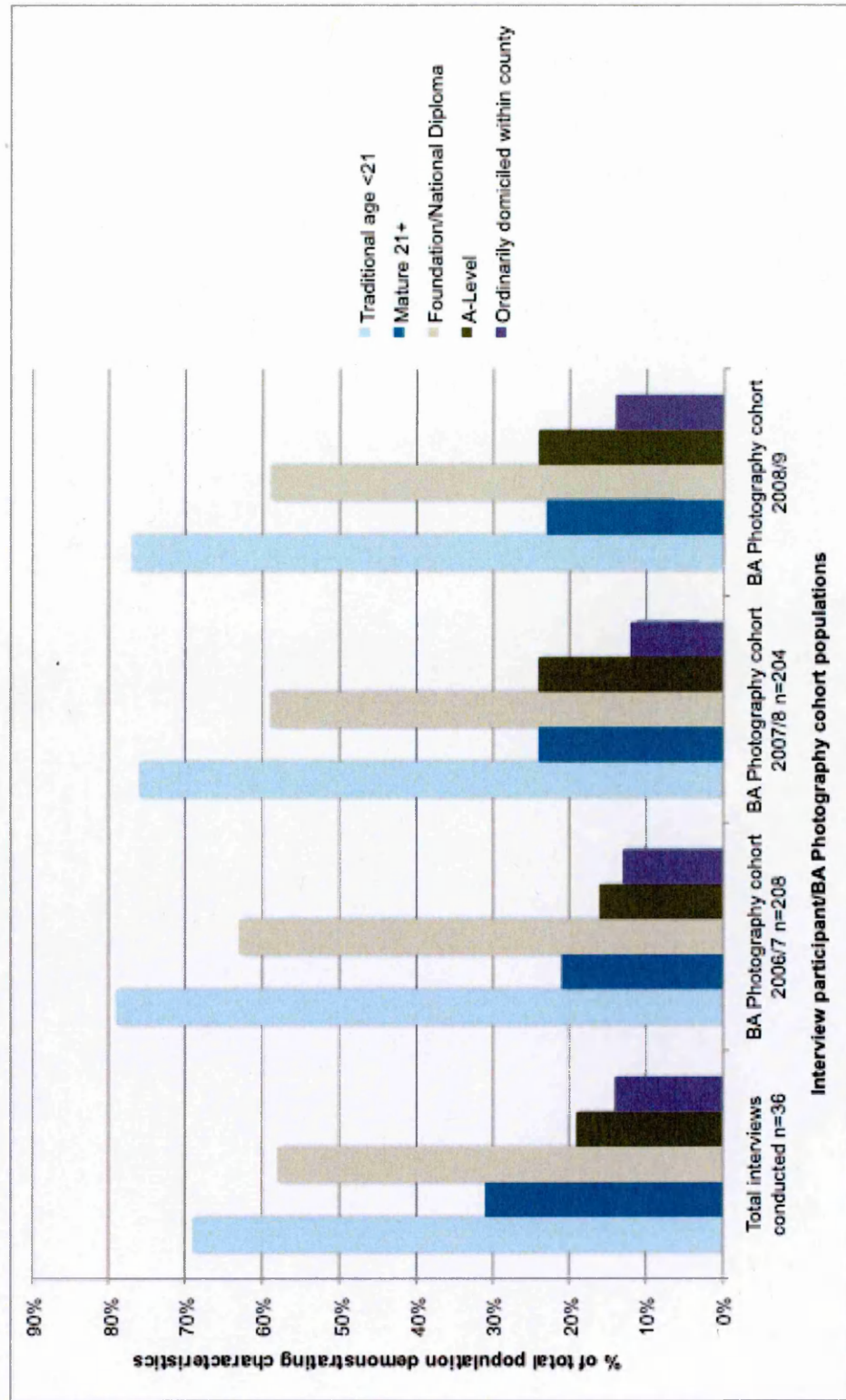
Appendix J

Characteristics of the interview participant sample in comparison with the BA Photography student cohort from 2006-2009

Figure 17: Age, prior qualification & county of ordinary domicile of interview sample population in comparison with the BA Photography course cohorts for academic years 2006/2007, 2007/2008 & 2008/2009 (Annual Monitoring Statements)

Appendix J

Figure 17: Age, prior qualification & county of ordinary domicile of interview sample population in comparison with the BA Photography course cohorts for academic years 2006/2007, 2007/2008 & 2008/2009 (Annual Monitoring Statements)



Appendix K

Reflections on tutor/researcher ‘insider’ status

Table 7 My own role as insider/outsider in an institutional context as a ‘case’

Appendix K

Table 7 My own role as insider/outsider in an institutional context as a ‘case’

Myself as:	Insider	Middle	Outsider
Student	<p>Students (I may go through similar doubts, uncertainties, motivators, joys etc)</p> <p>Individual background in some contexts (e.g. age, biographical, attitude, academic history, skills)</p>	<p>Other doctoral students (internal and Open University)</p>	<p>Institutional academic and administrative staff (I may have different and competing demands on my time and actions)</p> <p>Background in some contexts</p>
Graduate	<p>Students (in terms of having the experience)</p> <p>Staff</p>		<p>Students (in terms I have finished an undergraduate BA Photography experience at a different time)</p>
Photography graduate	<p>Photography students and staff</p>	<p>Students and staff from other courses with an interest in the subject</p> <p>Media subject area</p> <p>Staff/postgraduates who have degrees</p>	<p>Non photography students and staff</p> <p>Art (slightly) and Design (high) subject area.</p>
Lecturer	<p>Other members of academic staff</p>	<p>Members of administrative staff</p>	<p>Students</p>
Level 1 & 2 Photography tutor	<p>Level 1 and 2 Photography staff and students</p>	<p>Level 3 photography academic staff and students</p> <p>Level 1 and 2 tutors from other subjects</p>	<p>Students and staff from other courses</p>

Location at campus	Students and staff at my campus	Staff at other campus	Students and new staff at other campus
Researcher	Some academic staff Students (collaborative approach)	Students who undertake research at any level	Some academic staff (who research art not education) Students
Member of total institutional community	Staff	Students	Research audience

Appendix L

BA Photography Self, Peer & Tutor Essay Assessment pro-forma

Appendix L

Level 1: BA (HONS) Photography – Self Assessment Form – PACS Essays

STUDENT NAME:	
ESSAY TITLE:	
DATE:	

Checklist:

Cover sheet attached and stapled?	
Referencing & extensive bibliography included & in correct Harvard form?	
Arial font and line-spacing set to double spaced?	
Proof-read? (Spelling/grammar/punctuation checked?)	
Word count calculated & included?	
All images embedded in text & correctly titled & referenced?	

Please grade yourself against the assessment criteria as detailed below. – see original brief for learning outcomes.

Assessment Criteria:	A	B	C	D	E (fail)
Ideas (inc. formulating argument)					
Information, reading & research					
Application of theory					
Application of reading					
Use of multiple sources and compare/contrast different artists and points of view.					
Application of personal critical thought					
Contextual understanding					
Analysis of images					
Writing Skills/ Style/ Presentation					
IT skills					
Correct use of Harvard System					

<p>What are the best features of this work?</p>
<p>How could this work be improved?</p>
<p>Other Comments:</p>
<p>Possible areas of study skills support that might be needed in order to help improve future essays.</p>

Appendix M

The scale & nature of student doubting

- Figure 18** Frequency of all responses given by Doubting & Non-Doubting Level 1 (September, 2008 entry) BA Photography students to 'What factors encouraged you to stay?' (Survey 3: February 2009)
- Figure 19** Student Mentor (Level 1, September 2006 entrant) response to 'Did you ever think about leaving your course/the college?' by undergraduate course (Survey 1: June 2007)
- Figure 20** Student Mentor (Level 1, September 2006 entrant) response to 'Did you ever think about leaving your course/the college?' aggregated by Subject Area of undergraduate course at time of delivery (Survey 1: June 2007)
- Figure 21** BA Photography student (Level 1, September 2008 entrant) response to 'Have you ever thought about leaving the course?' (Survey 3: February 2009)
- Figure 22** Frequency of all responses given by Doubting (33%) & Non-Doubting (66%) Level 1 (September, 2006 entry) student mentors to 'What factors encouraged you to stay?' (Survey 1: June 2007)
- Figure 23** Frequency of responses given by Doubting and Non-Doubting Level 1 (September, 2006 entry) student mentors to 'What was the most important factor encouraging you to stay?' (Survey 1: June 2007)

Appendix M

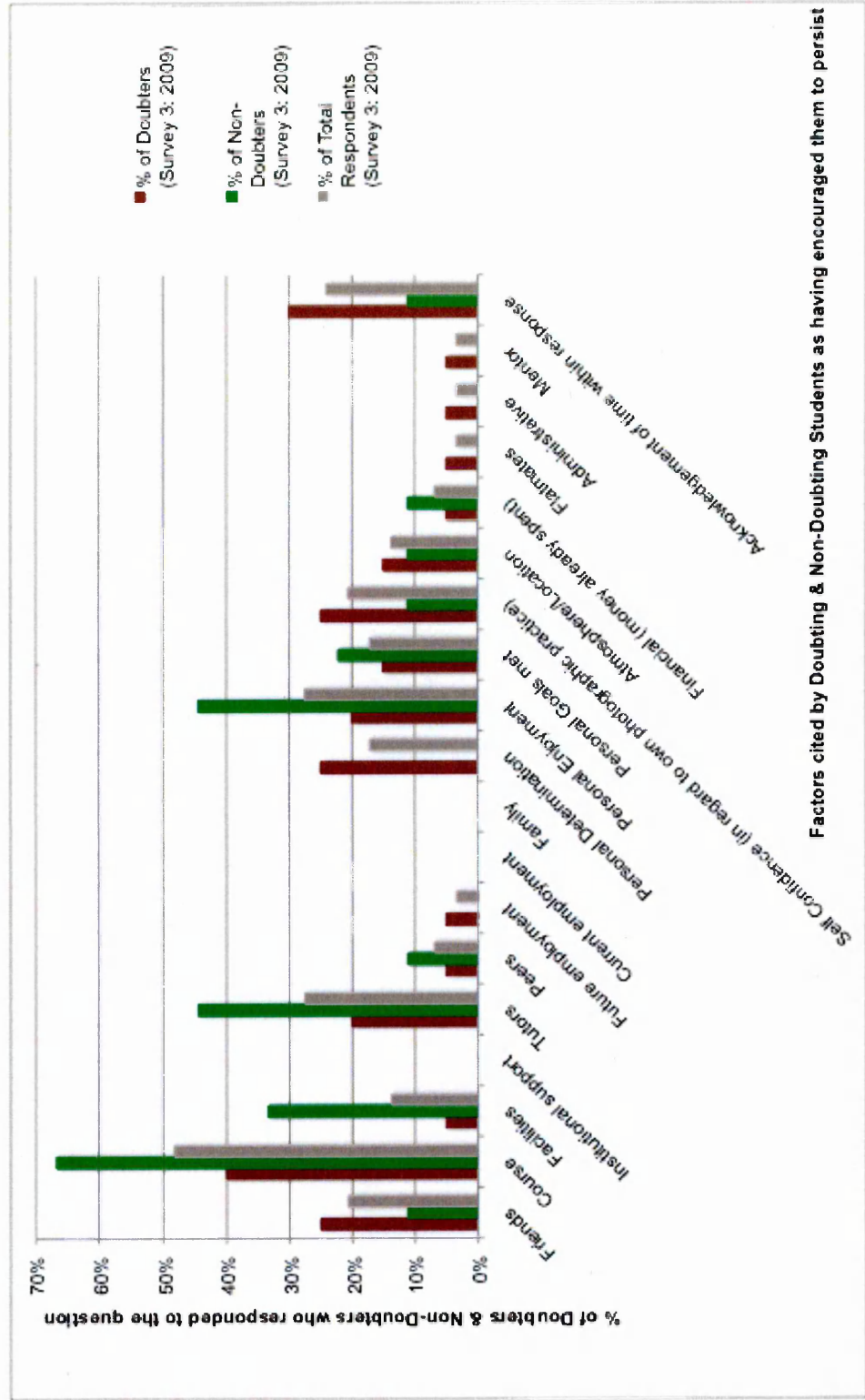
Figure 18 Frequency of all responses given by Doubting & Non-Doubting Level 1 (September, 2008 entry) BA Photography students to 'What factors encouraged you to stay?' (Survey 3: February 2009)

Total Response Rate to this question: 54%

Doubter Response Rate to this question: 87%

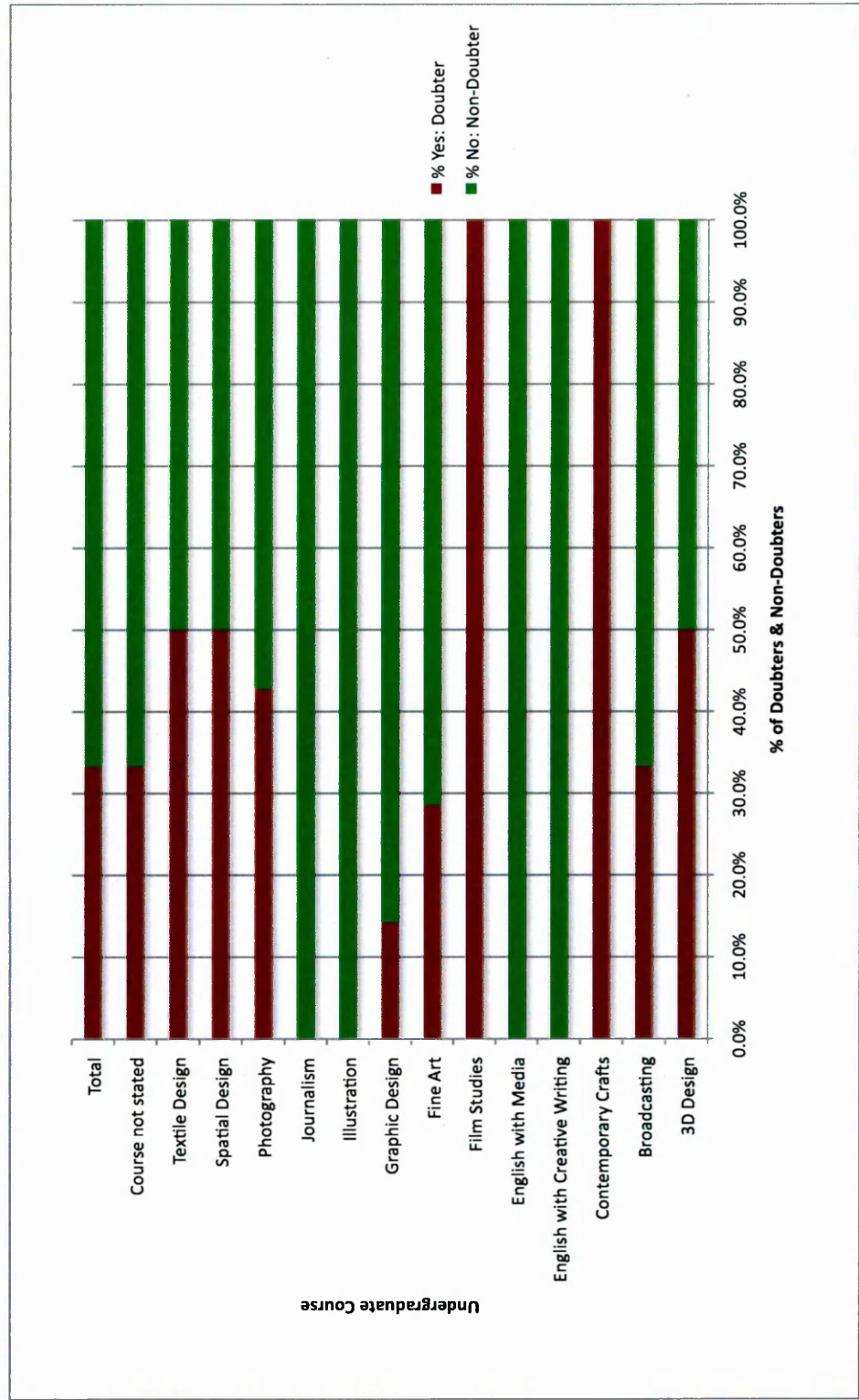
Non-Doubter Response Rate to this question: 23%

(Non-Doubters who left the question blank: 56%; Non-Doubters who wrote 'n/a': 16%)



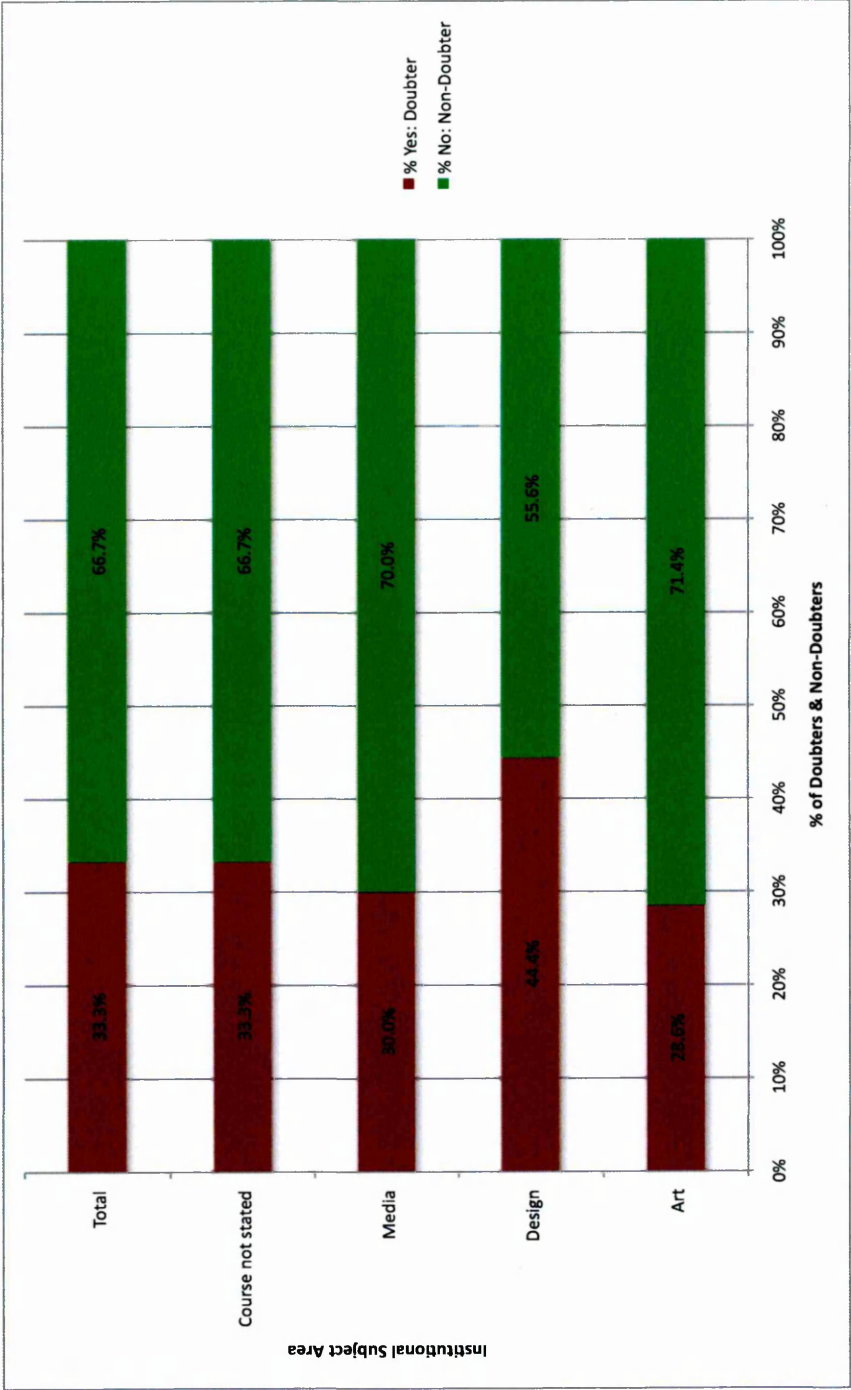
Appendix M

Figure 19 Student Mentor (Level 1, September 2006 entrant) response to 'Did you ever think about leaving your course/the college?' by undergraduate course (Survey 1: June 2007)
Questionnaire Total Response Rate: 83%



Appendix M

Figure 20 Student Mentor (Level 1, September 2006 entrant) response to 'Did you ever think about leaving your course/the college?' aggregated by Subject Area of undergraduate course at time of delivery (Survey 1: June 2007)
Questionnaire Total Response Rate: 83%



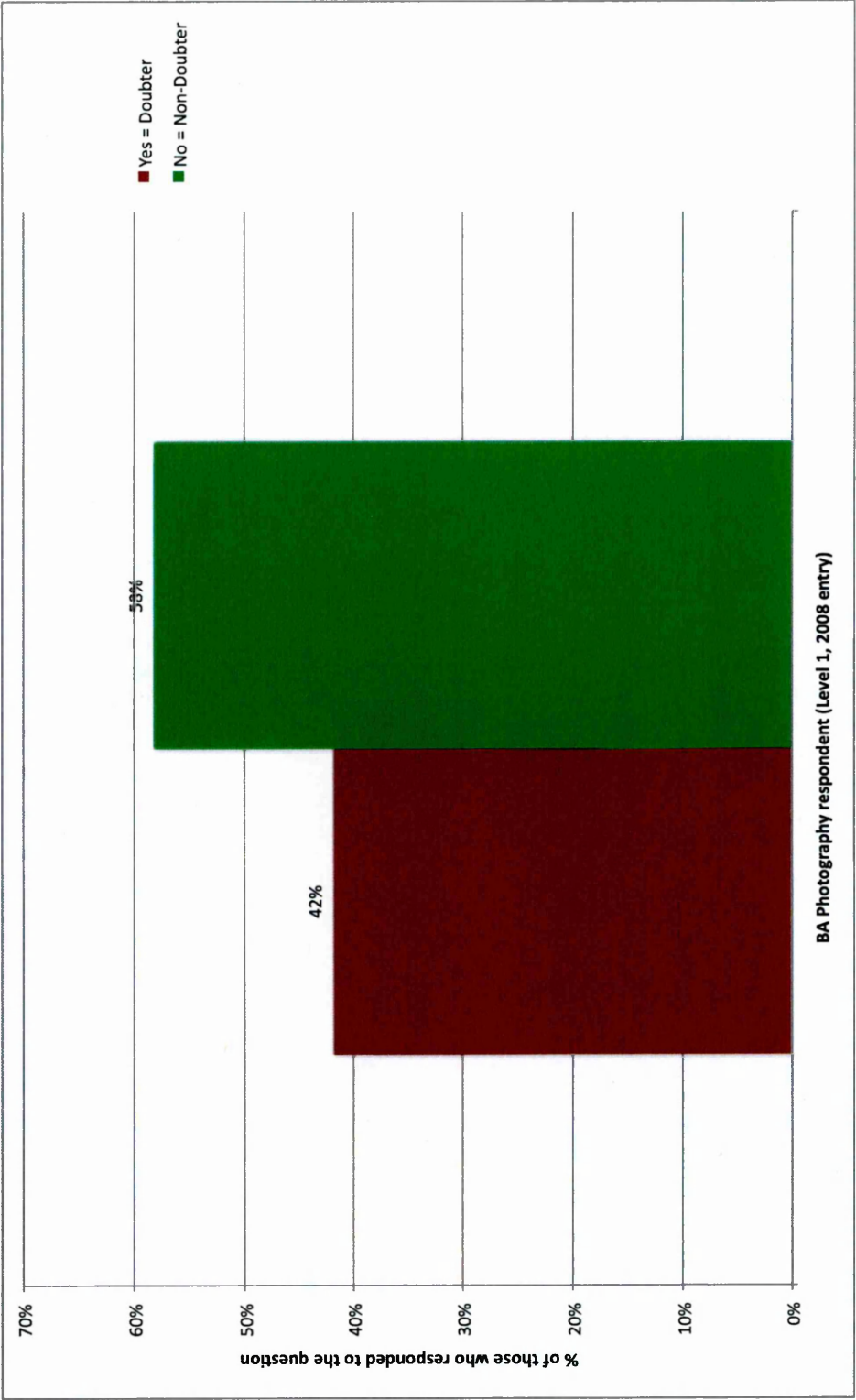
M

Appendix

Figure 21
BA

Photography student (Level 1, September 2008 entrant) response to 'Have you ever thought about leaving the course?' (Survey 3: February 2009)

Questionnaire Response Rate of the whole cohort: 74%
Questionnaire Response Rate of those students present: 80%
Response rate to the question: 100%



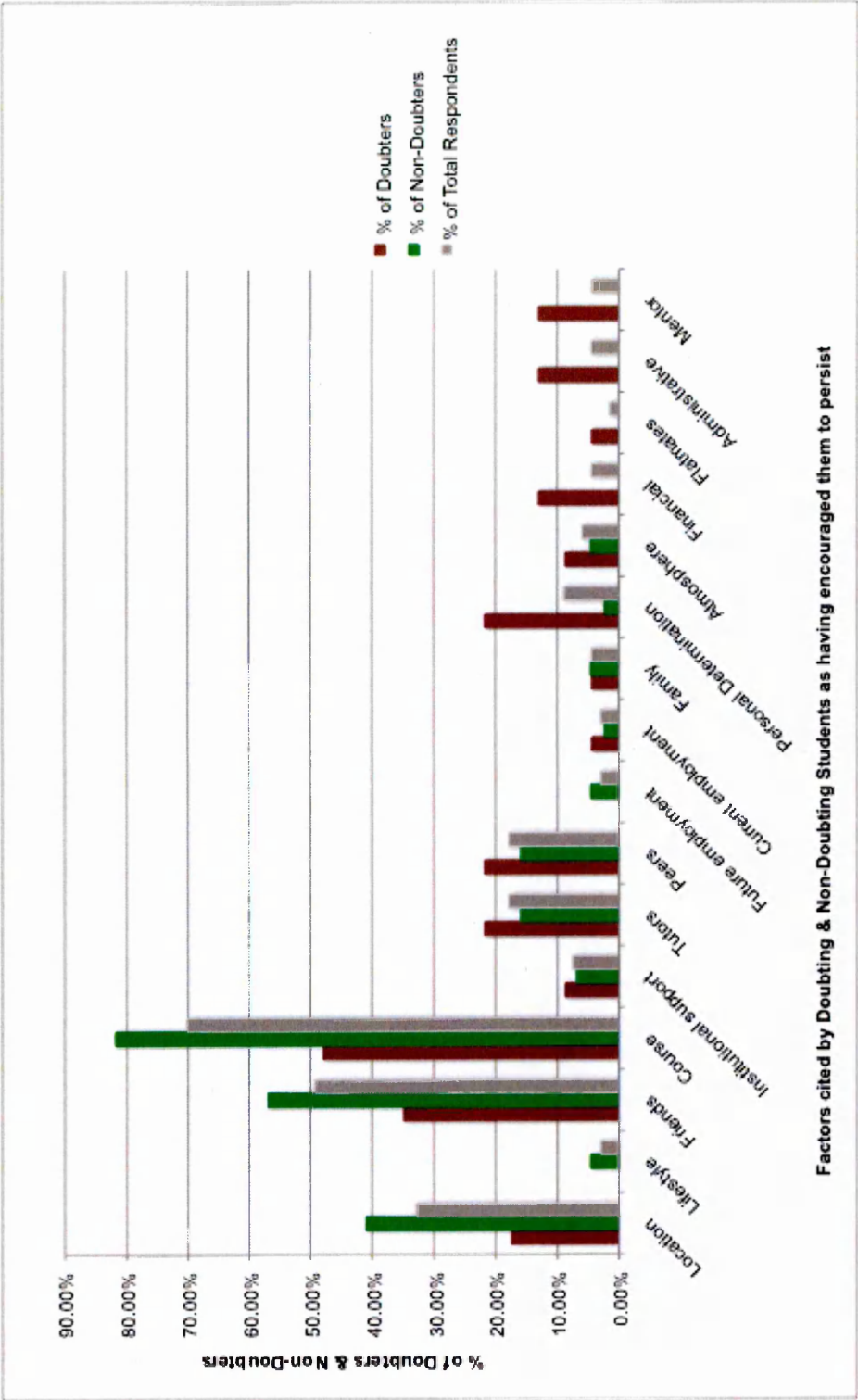
Appendix M

Figure 22 Frequency of all responses given by Doubting (33%) & Non-Doubting (66%) Level 1 (September, 2006 entry) student mentors to 'What factors encouraged you to stay?' (Survey 1: June 2007)

Total Response Rate to this question: 97.10%

Doubter Response Rate to this question: 100%

Non-Doubter Response Rate to this question: 95.65%



Appendix M

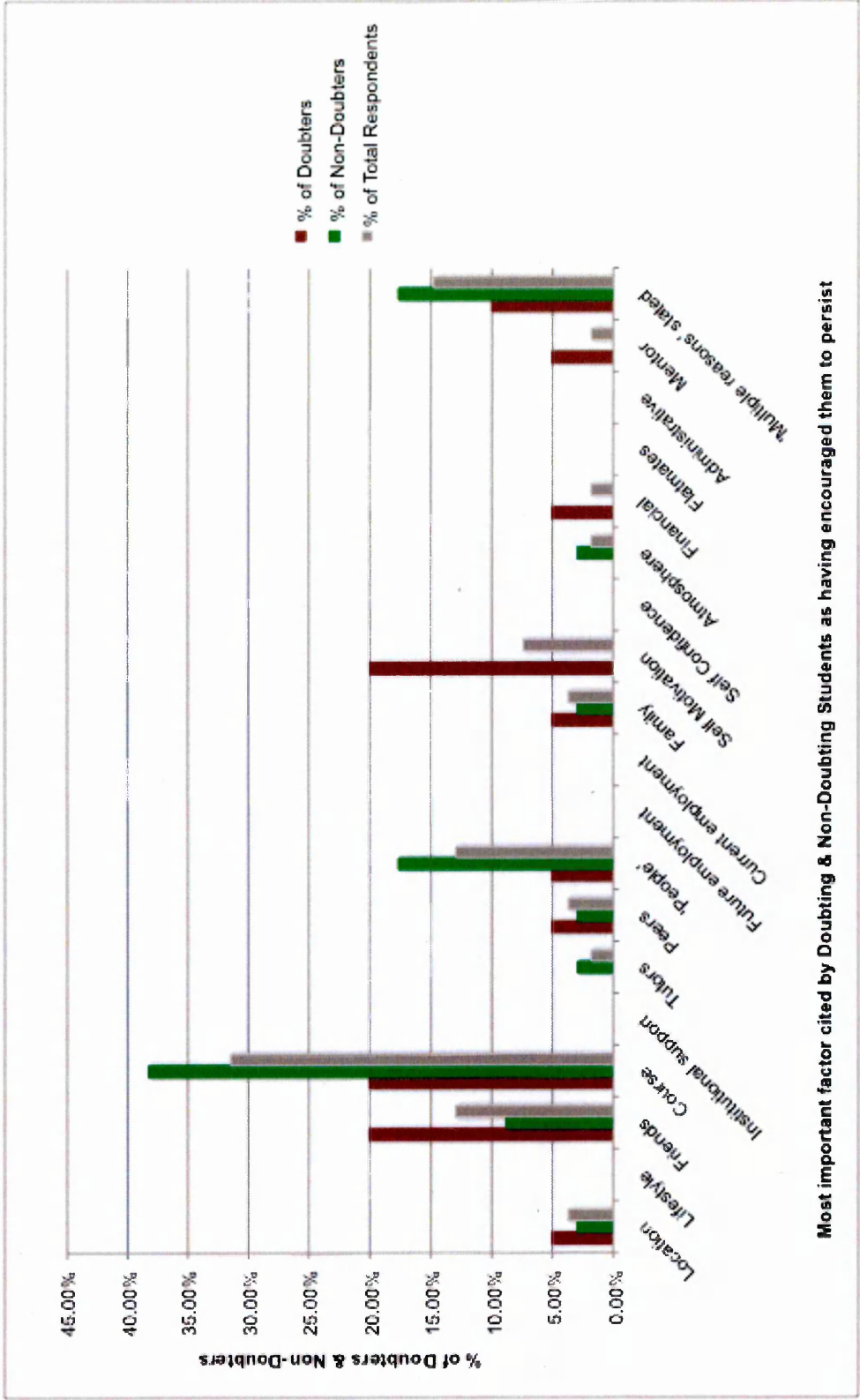
Figure 23 Frequency of responses given by Doubting and Non-Doubting Level 1 (September, 2006 entry) student mentors to

‘What was the most important factor encouraging you to stay?’ (Survey 1: June 2007)

Total Response Rate to this question: 78.26%

Doubter Response Rate to this question: 86.96%

Non-Doubter Response Rate to this question: 73.91%



Most important factor cited by Doubting & Non-Doubting Students as having encouraged them to persist

Appendix N

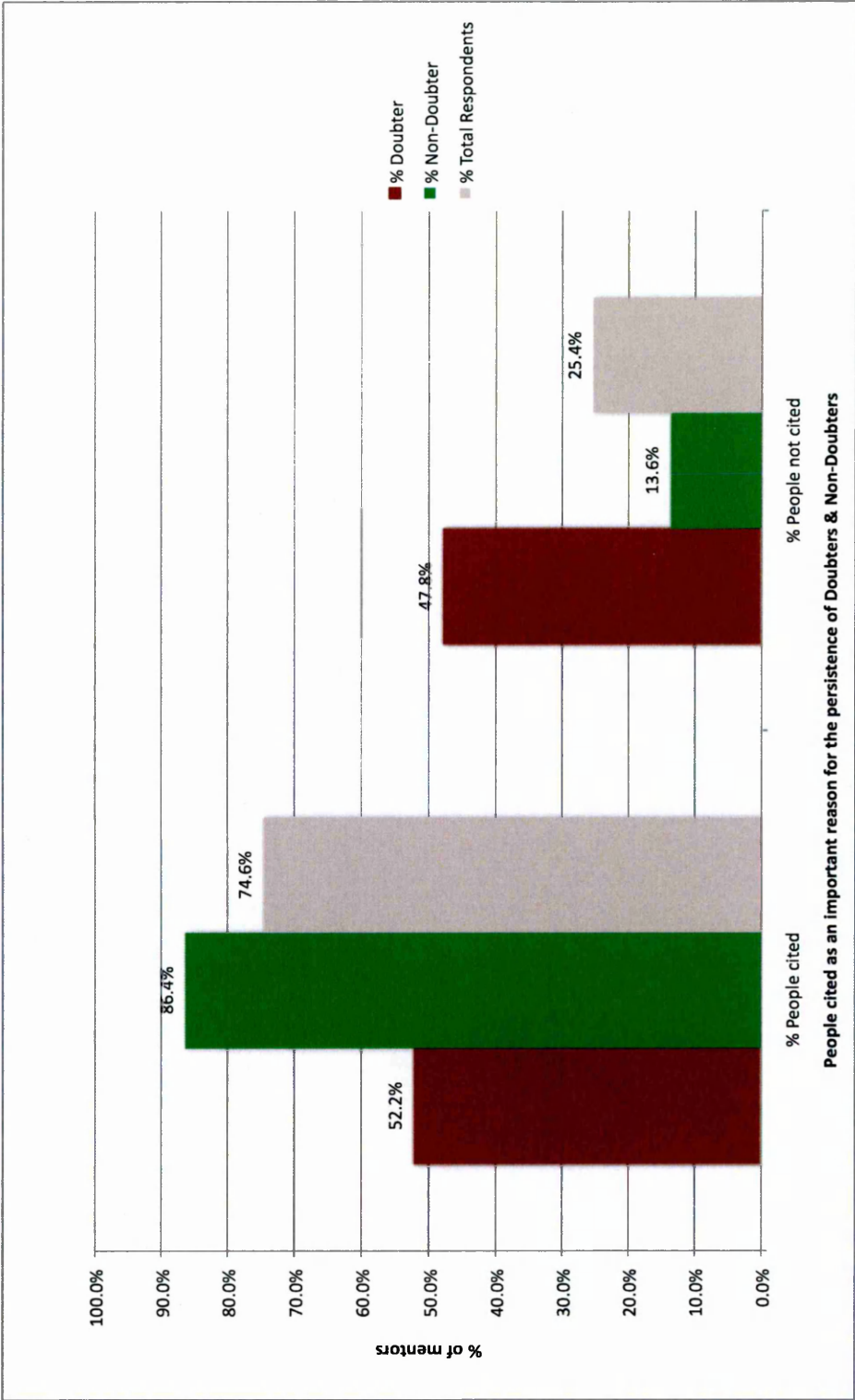
The role of 'people' in the persistence process

- Figure 24** Frequency of responses which included 'People' given by Doubting and Non-Doubting Level 1 (September, 2006 entry) student mentors to 'What factors encouraged you to stay?' (Survey 1: June 2007)
- Figure 25** Identity of 'People' cited by both Doubting and Non-Doubting Level 1 (September, 2006 entry) student mentors who mentioned 'People' as a factor that encouraged them to persist (Survey 1: June 2007)
- Figure 26** Identity of 'People' cited by Student Mentors to 'What factors encouraged you to stay?' (Survey 1: June 2007) & incoming Level 1 students to 'What was the best thing about your previous course?' (Survey 2: September 2007, 2008 & 2009) as a % of the total sample that referred to people.
- Figure 27** Identity of 'People' cited by incoming Level 1 students (September 2007 entry) and BA Photography incoming Level 1 students (September 2007, 2008 & 2009 entry) as a % of the total sample that referred to people as being the 'best thing' about their previous course of study (Survey 2: September 2007, 2008 & 2009).

Appendix N

Figure 24 Frequency of responses which included 'People' given by Doubting and Non-Doubting Level 1 (September, 2006 entry) student mentors to 'What factors encouraged you to stay?' (Survey 1: June 2007)

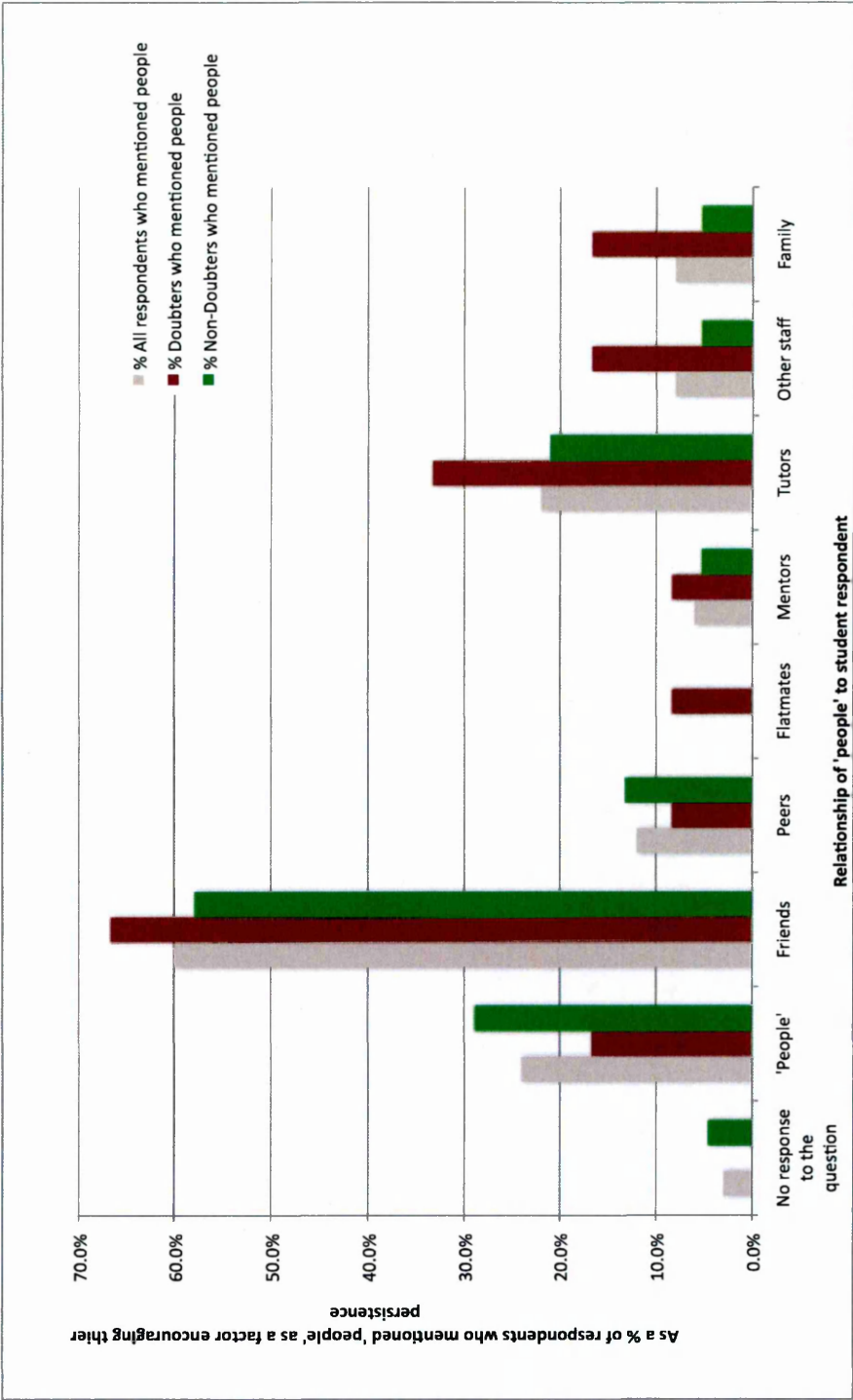
Total Response Rate to this question: 97%
Doubter Response Rate to this question: 100%
Non-Doubter Response Rate to this question: 96%



Appendix N

Figure 25 Identity of 'People' cited by both Doubting and Non-Doubting Level 1 (September, 2006 entry) student mentors who mentioned 'People' as a factor that encouraged them to persist (Survey 1: June 2007)

Total Response Rate to this question: 97%
Doubter Response Rate to this question: 100%
Non-Doubter Response Rate to this question: 96%



Appendix N

Figure 26 Identity of 'People' cited by Student Mentors to 'What factors encouraged you to stay?' (Survey 1: June 2007) & incoming Level 1 students to 'What was the best thing about your previous course?' (Survey 2: September 2007, 2008 & 2009) as a % of the total sample that referred to people.

All courses: Student Mentor response rate to this question: 97% (Survey 1)

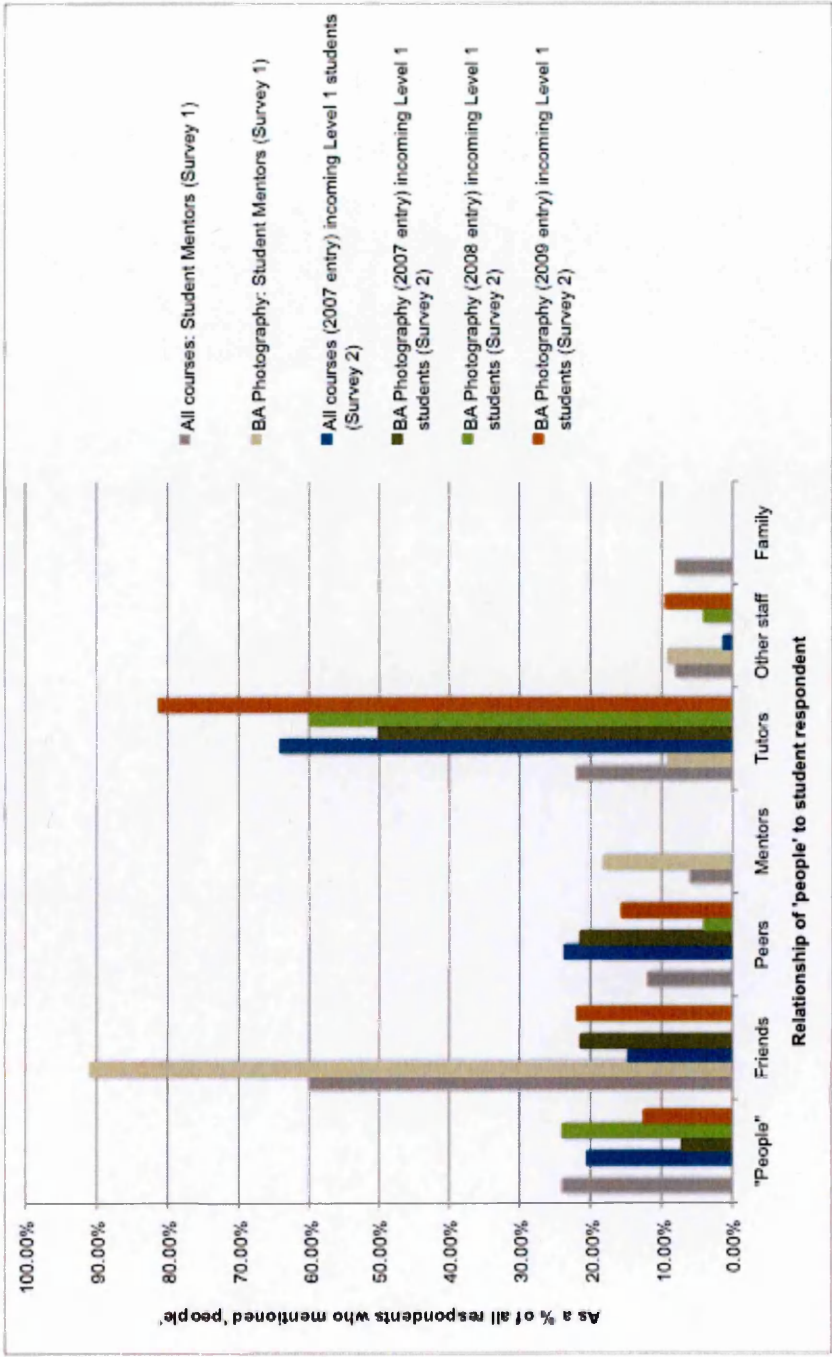
BA Photography: Student Mentor response rate to this question: 93% (Survey 1)

All courses: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 96% (Survey 2, 2007)

BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 77% (Survey 2, 2007)

BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 94% (Survey 2, 2008)

BA Photography: Incoming (2009 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 98% (Survey 2, 2009)



Appendix N

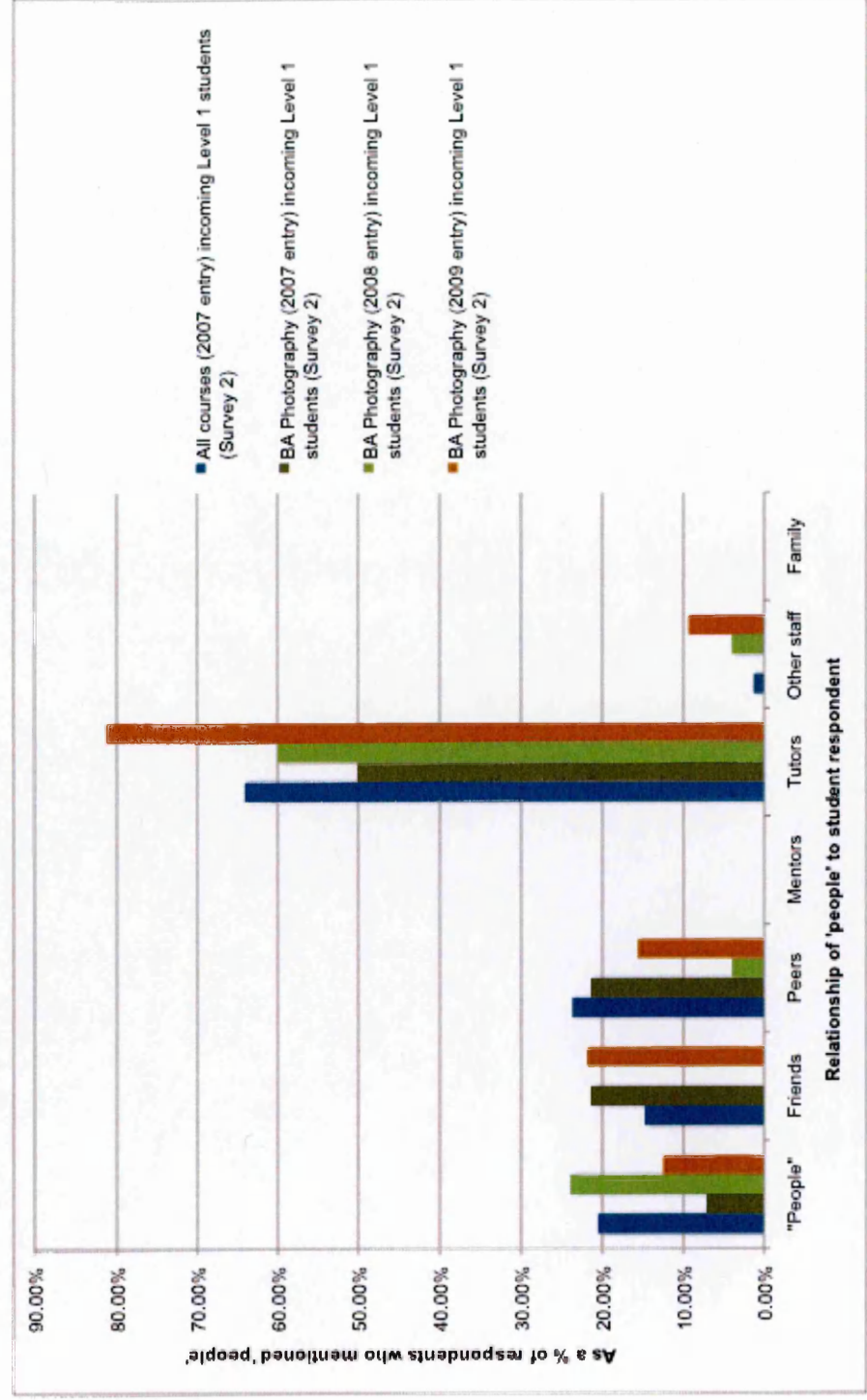
Figure 27 Identity of 'People' cited by incoming Level 1 students (September 2007 entry) and BA Photography incoming Level 1 students (September 2007, 2008 & 2009 entry) as a % of the total sample that referred to people as being the 'best thing' about their previous course of study (Survey 2: September 2007, 2008 & 2009).

All courses: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 96% (Survey 2, 2007)

BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 77% (Survey 2, 2007)

BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 94% (Survey 2, 2008)

BA Photography: Incoming (2009 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 98% (Survey 2, 2009)



Appendix O

Change & Confidence Levels of BA Photography student at February mid-semester point

- Figure 28** BA Photography, Level 1 students' response to the question 'Do you think you've changed since you arrived?' (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009)
- Figure 29** Personal changes cited by BA Photography, Level 1 students who responded 'Yes' they had changed positively since October entry at my institution (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009)
- Figure 30** Confidence levels of BA Photography Level 1 students at mid-semester point (February) in response to 'Do you feel confident on the course at the moment?' (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009), as a percentage of all respondents to the item
- Figure 31** Changes in confidence levels of BA Photography, Level 1, students from entry to mid-semester point (February) in response to 'Have you always felt confident on the course?' (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009) as a percentage of all respondents who also declared their (February) confidence levels at the time of questionnaire delivery
- Figure 32** Prior qualification of BA Photography Level 1 students who did not always feel confident on the course & subsequent February confidence levels (as an aggregate of all responses) (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009) as a percentage of all respondents who also declared their (February) confidence levels at the time of questionnaire delivery
- Figure 33** Prior qualification of BA Photography Level 1 students who 'maybe' always felt confident on the course & subsequent February confidence levels (as an aggregate of all responses) (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009)
- Figure 34** Prior qualification of BA Photography Level 1 students who always felt confident on the course & subsequent February confidence levels (as an aggregate of all responses) (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009)

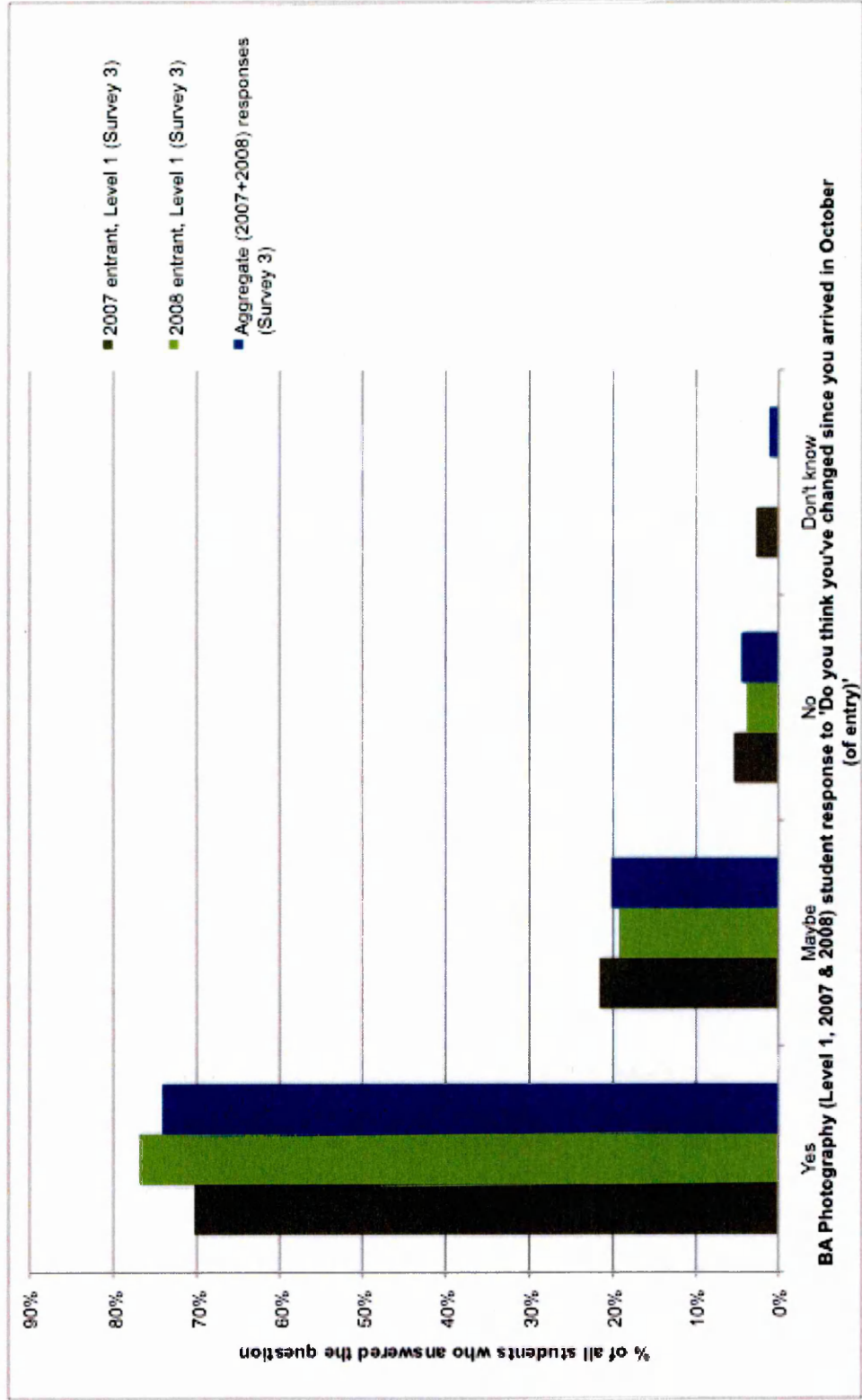
Appendix O

Figure 28 BA Photography, Level 1 students response to the question 'Do you think you've changed since you arrived?' (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009)

Aggregate all BA Photography student response rate to this question: 93%

BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student respondent rate to this question: 90% (2008)

BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student respondent rate to this question: 95% (2009)



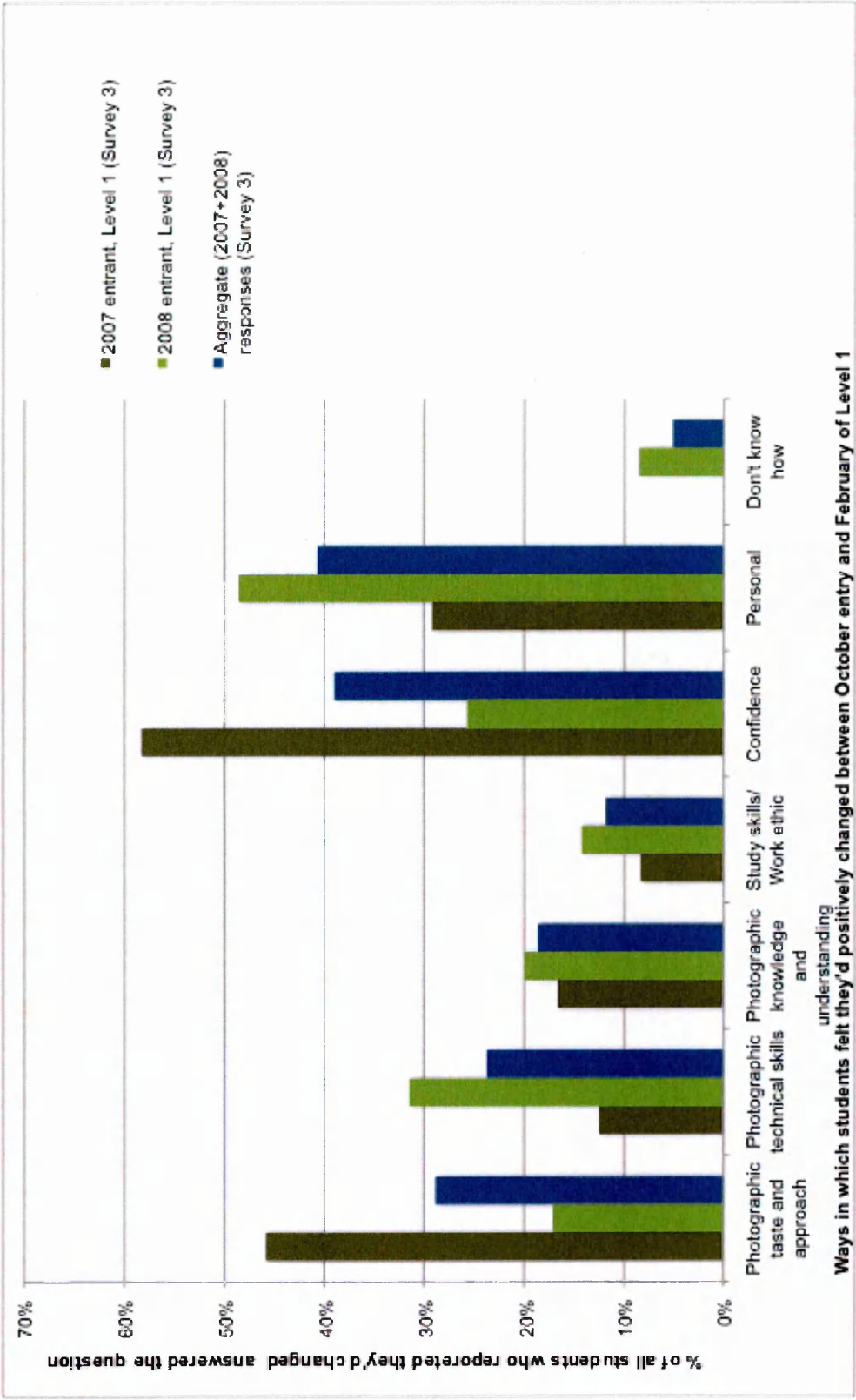
Appendix O

Figure 29 Personal changes cited by BA Photography, Level 1 students who responded 'Yes' they had changed positively since October entry at my institution (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009)

Aggregate all BA Photography student response rate to this question: 89%

BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student respondent rate to this question: 92% (2008)

BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student respondent rate to this question: 88% (2009)



Appendix O

Figure 30 Confidence levels of BA Photography Level 1 students at mid-semester point (February) in response to 'Do you feel confident on the course at the moment?' (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009), as a percentage of all respondents to the item

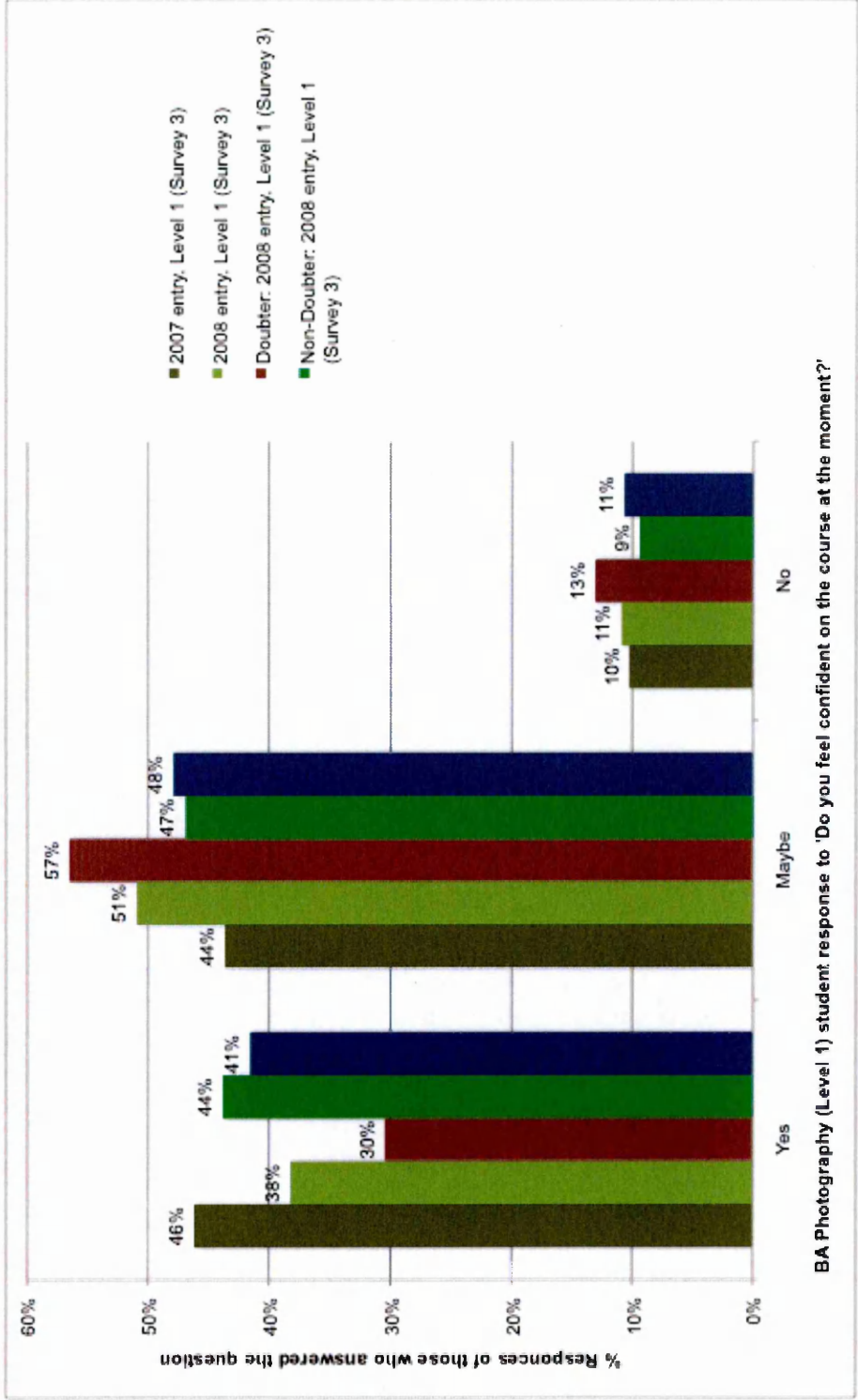
Aggregate all BA Photography student response rate to this question: 98%

BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 95% (2008)

BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 100% (2009)

Doubter (2008 entry) response rate to this question: 100% (2009)

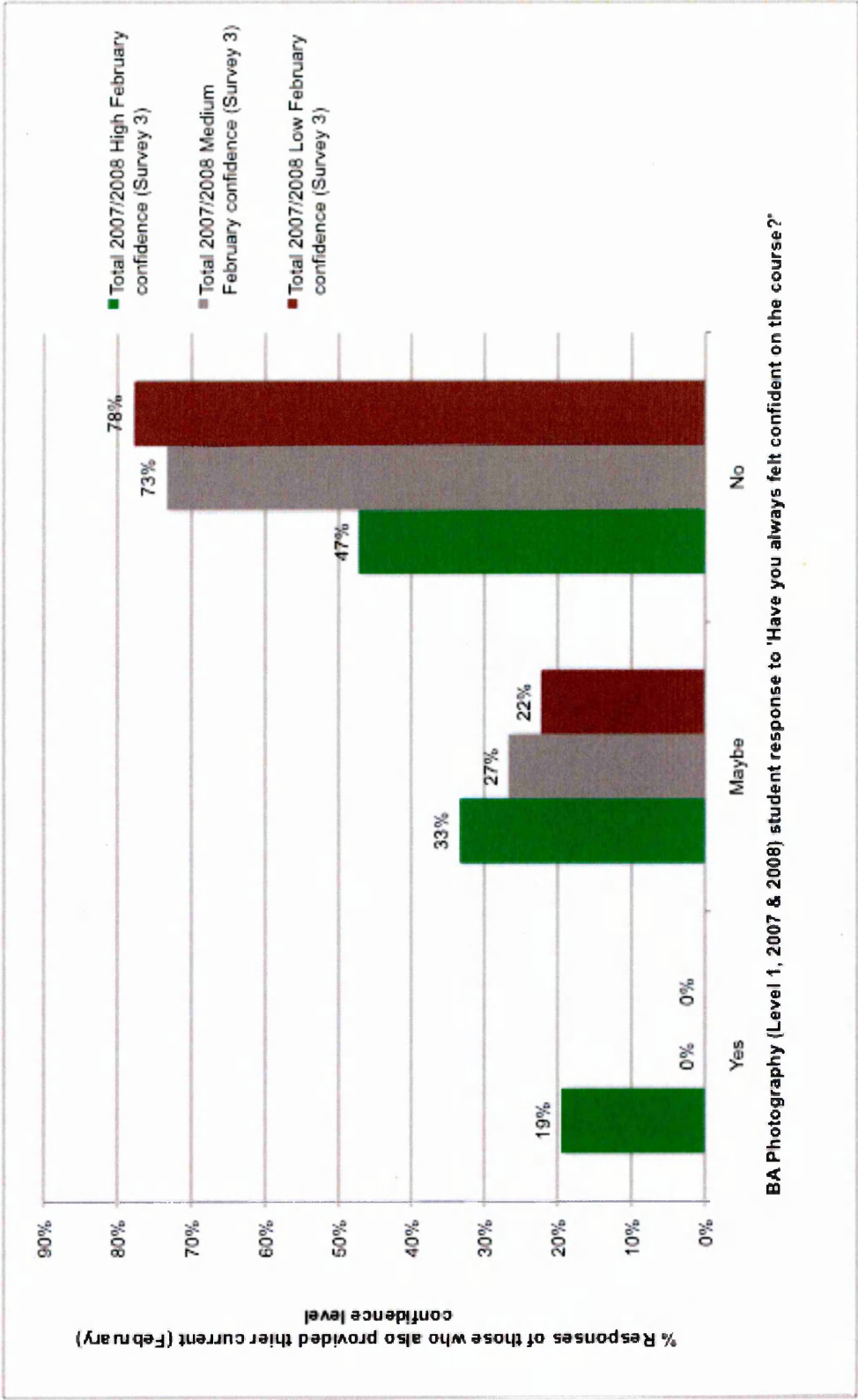
Non-Doubter (2008 entry) response rate to this question: 100% (2009)



Appendix O

Figure 31 Changes in confidence levels of BA Photography, Level 1, students from entry to mid-semester point (February) in response to 'Have you always felt confident on the course?' (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009) as a percentage of all respondents who also declared their (February) confidence levels at the time of questionnaire delivery

Aggregate of total BA Photography cohort response rate to this question: 84%
BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 100% (2008)
BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 92% (2009)



Appendix O

Figure 32 Prior qualification of BA Photography Level 1 students who did not always feel confident on the course & subsequent February confidence levels (as an aggregate of all responses) (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009) as a percentage of all respondents who also declared their (February) confidence levels at the time of questionnaire delivery

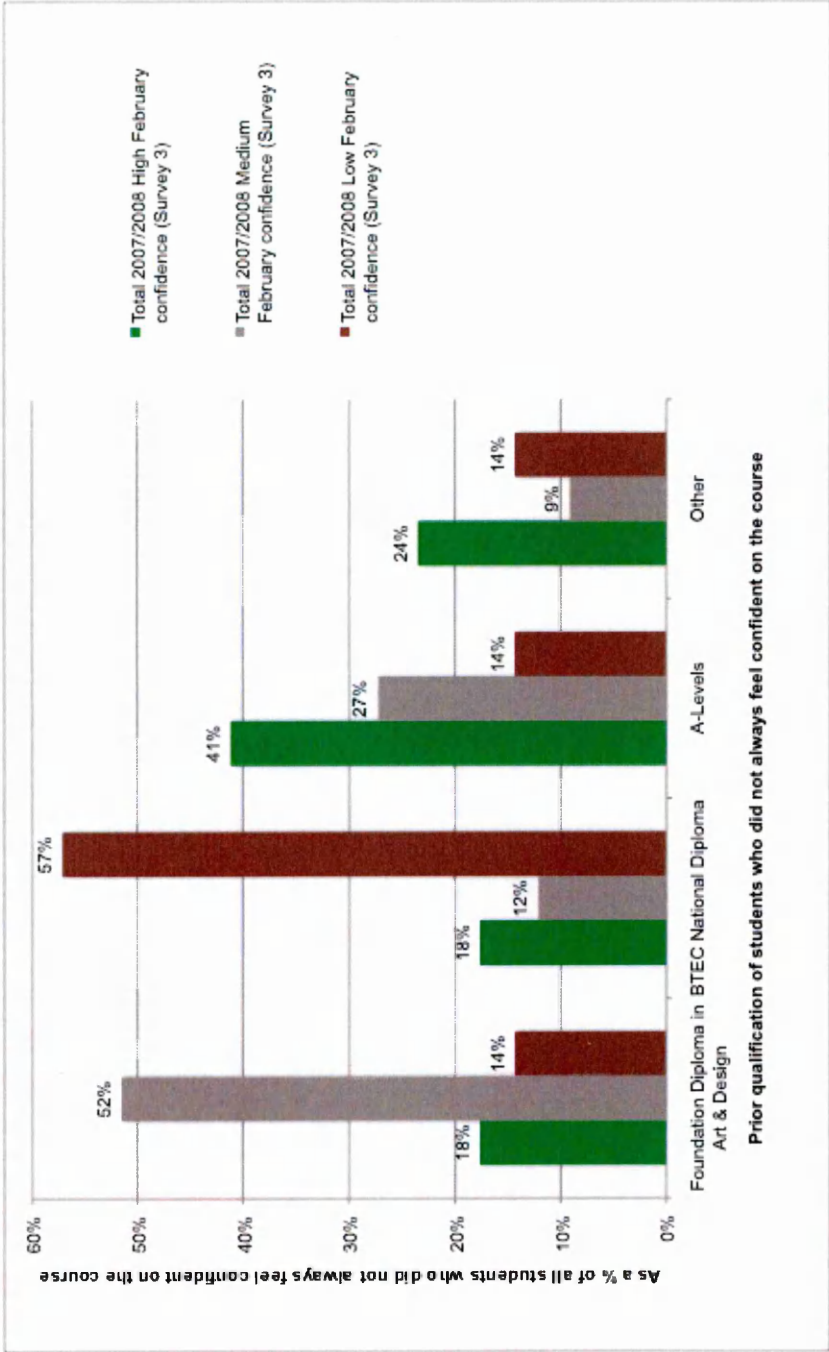
BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 100% (2008)

BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 92% (2009)

High Confidence Level student: those who stated they felt confident on the course in the February of Level 1 study

Medium Confidence Level student: those who stated they might feel confident on the course in the February of Level 1 study

Low Confidence Level student: those who stated they did not feel confident on the course in the February of Level 1 study



Appendix O

Figure 33 Prior qualification of BA Photography Level 1 students who 'maybe' always felt confident on the course & subsequent February confidence levels (as an aggregate of all responses) (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009)

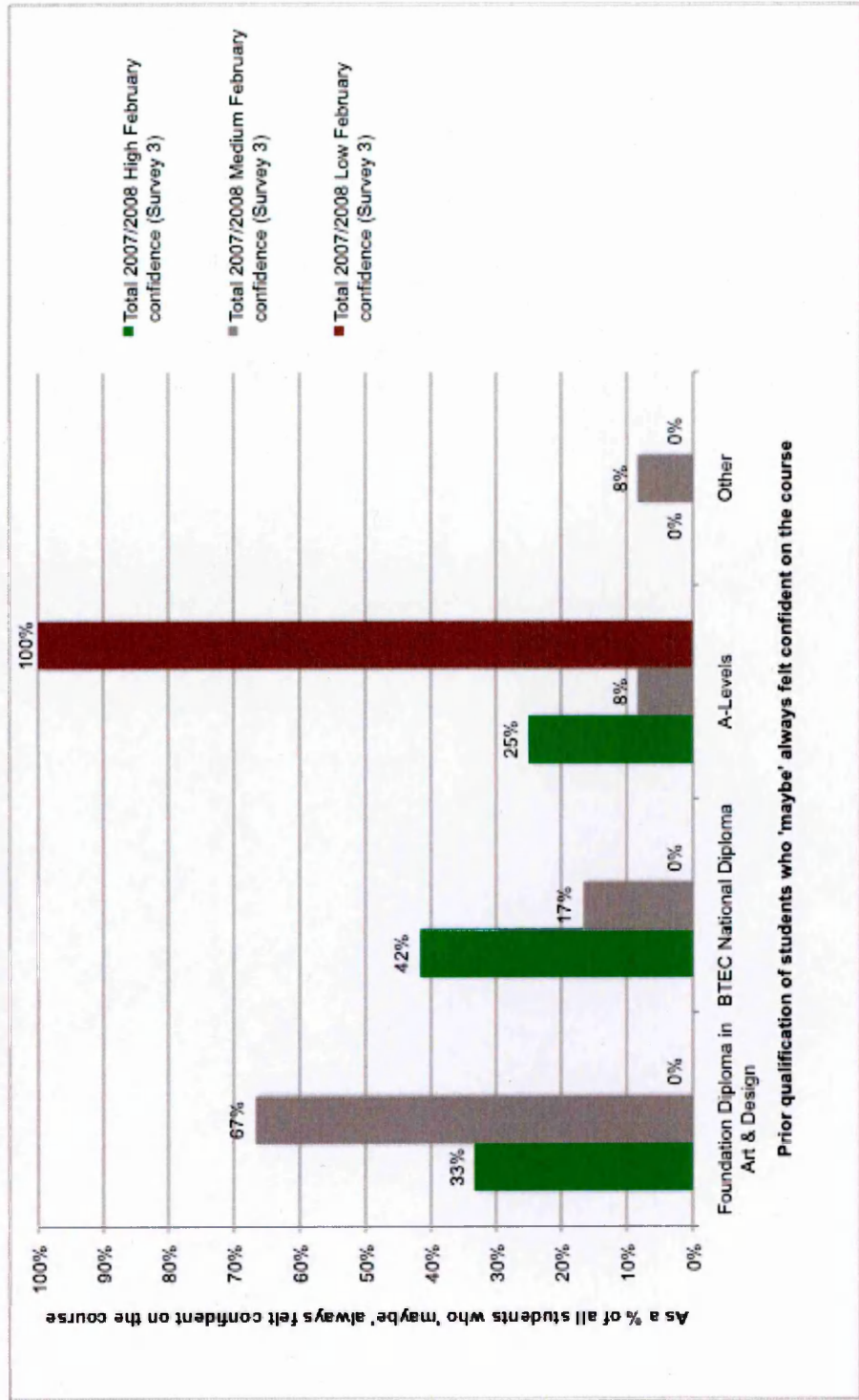
BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 100% (2008)

BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 92% (2009)

High Confidence Level student: those who stated they felt confident on the course in the February of Level 1 study

Medium Confidence Level student: those who stated they might feel confident on the course in the February of Level 1 study

Low Confidence Level student: those who stated they did not feel confident on the course in the February of Level 1 study



Appendix O

Figure 34 Prior qualification of BA Photography Level 1 students who always felt confident on the course & subsequent February confidence levels (as an aggregate of all responses) (Survey 3: 2008 & 2009)

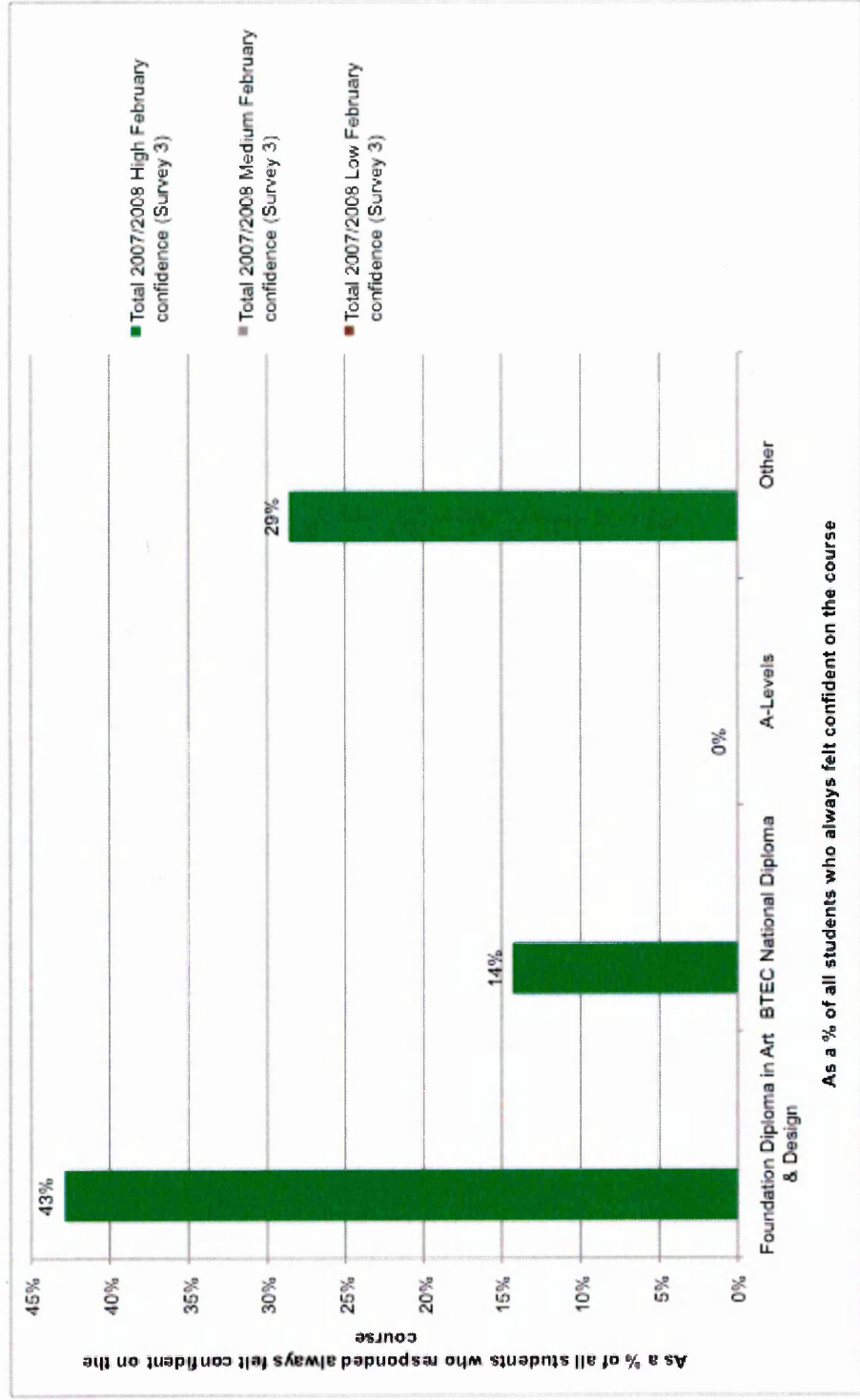
BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 100% (2008)

BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 92% (2009)

High Confidence Level student: those who stated they felt confident on the course in the February of Level 1 study

Medium Confidence Level student: those who stated they might feel confident on the course in the February of Level 1 study

Low Confidence Level student: those who stated they did not feel confident on the course in the February of Level 1 study



As a % of all students who always felt confident on the course

Appendix P

The reasons for entering Higher Education, the institution & course

- Figure 35** Incoming BA Photography, Level 1 students first choice reason for entering HE (Survey 2: September 2007, 2008 & 2009)
- Figure 36** Incoming BA Photography, Level 1 students 1st choice reasons for entering HE, using Stage's (1989) categorization (Survey 2: 2007, 2008 & 2009)
- Figure 37** Frequency of all responses given by incoming Level 1 students & BA Photography incoming Level 1 students to 'What were the best things about your previous course?' (Survey 2: September 2007, 2008 & 2009).
- Figure 38** Cross-section of courses summarising incoming Level 1 (2007 entry) students' reasons for entering Higher Education (1st response given only) (Survey 2: September 2007)
- Figure 39** Cross-section of courses summarising incoming Level 1 (2007 entry) students' reasons for attending my institution (1st responses only) (Survey 2: September 2007)
- Figure 40** Breakdown of 'Other Contextual Factors' cited by a cross-section of courses summarising incoming Level 1 students (2007 entry) reasons for attending my institution as an aggregate of all responses given (Survey 2: September 2007)
- Figure 41** Incoming Level 1 students & BA Photography incoming Level 1 students response to the question "What keeps you going/helps you maintain your motivation in your studies?" (Survey 2: 2007, 2008 & 2009)

Appendix P

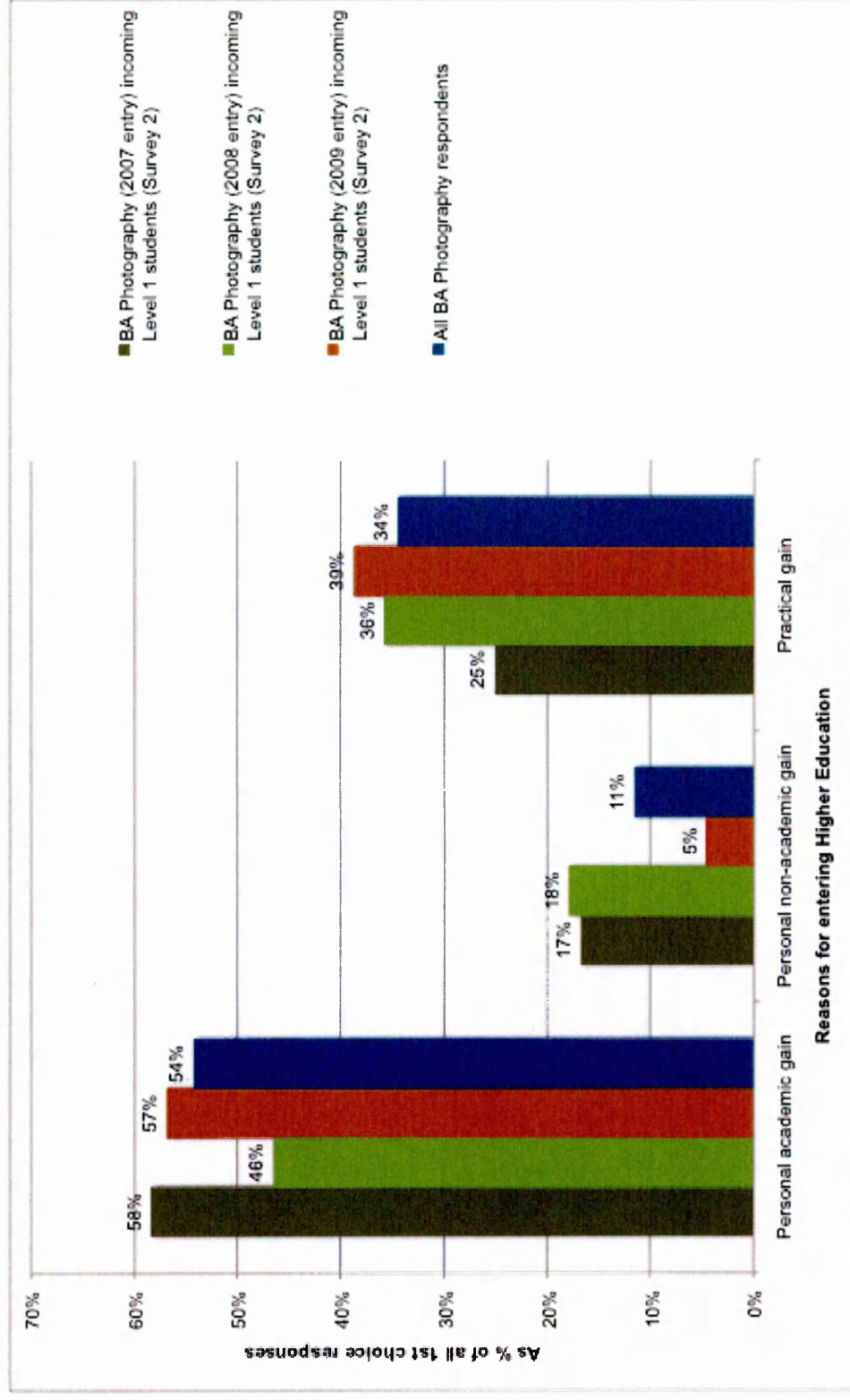
Figure 35 Incoming BA Photography, Level 1 students first choice reason for entering HE (Survey 2: September 2007, 2008 & 2009)

Aggregate all BA Photography student response rate to this question: 87%

BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student respondent rate to this question: 80% (2007)

BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student respondent rate to this question: 78% (2008)

BA Photography: Incoming (2009 entry) Level 1 student respondent rate to this question: 100% (2009)



Appendix P

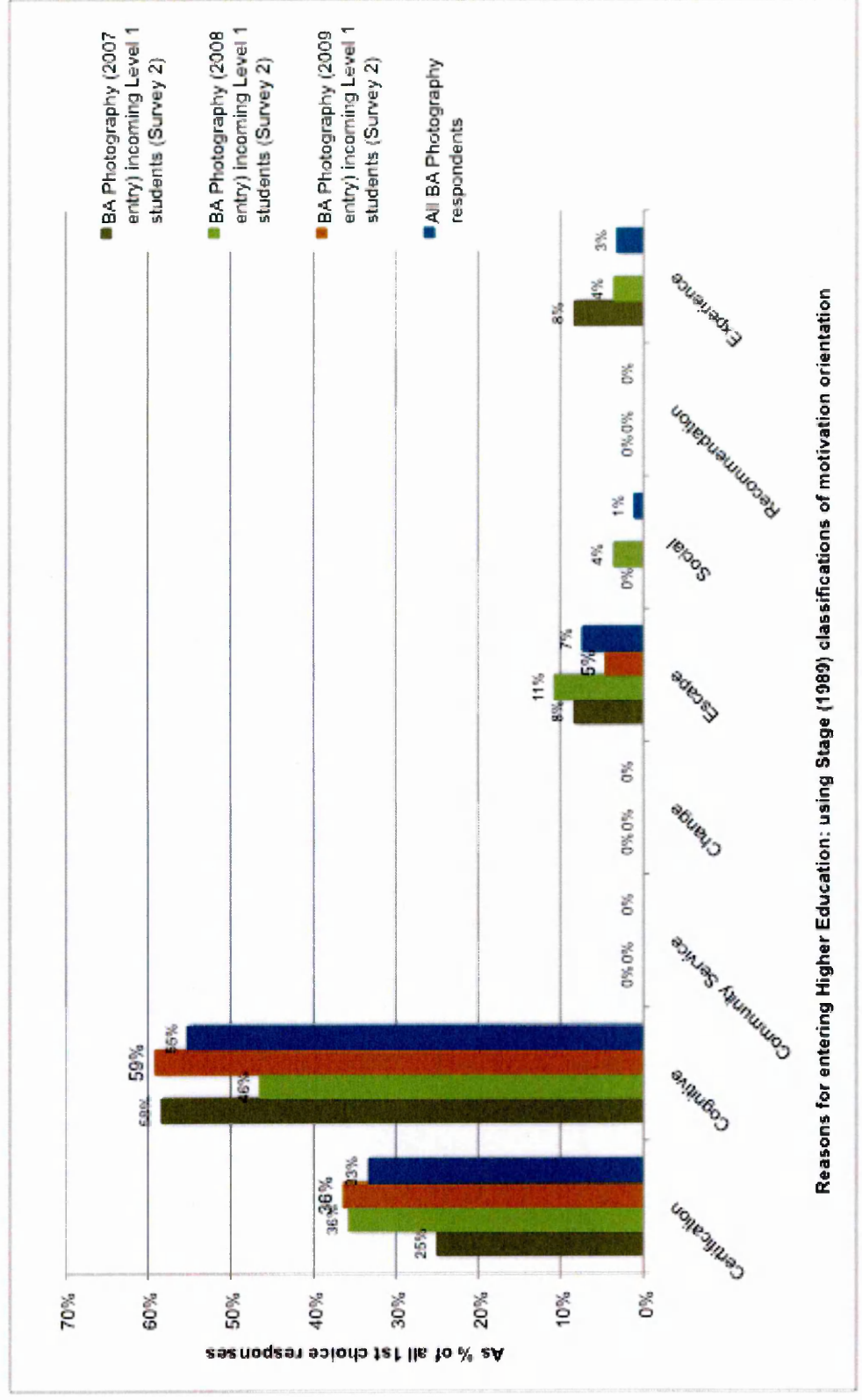
Figure 36 Incoming BA Photography, Level 1 students 1st choice reasons for entering HE, using Stage's (1989) categorization (Survey 2: 2007, 2008 & 2009)

Aggregate all BA Photography student response rate to this question: 87%

BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student respondent rate to this question: 80% (2007)

BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student respondent rate to this question: 78% (2008)

BA Photography: Incoming (2009 entry) Level 1 student respondent rate to this question: 100% (2009)

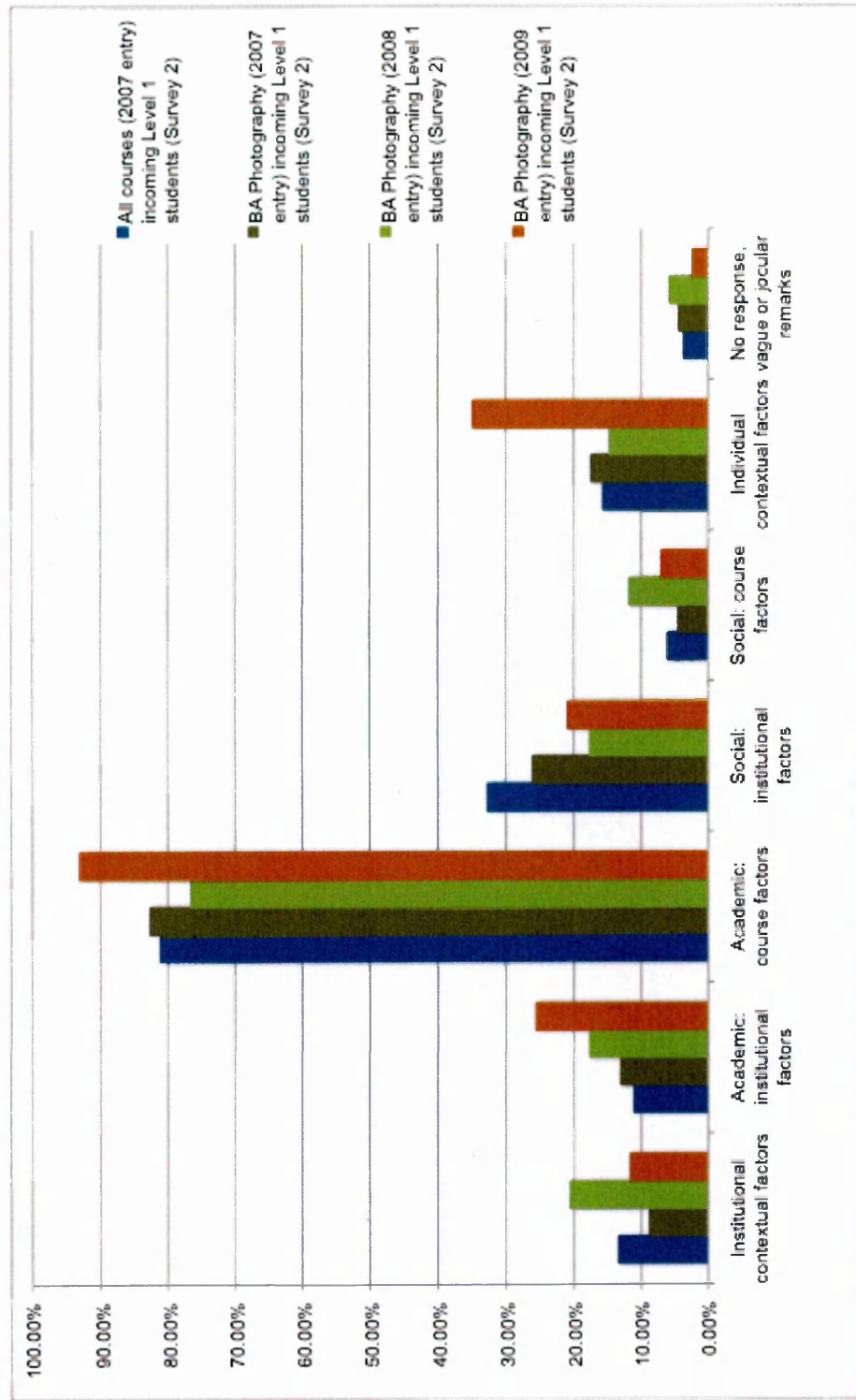


Reasons for entering Higher Education: using Stage (1989) classifications of motivation orientation

Appendix P

Figure 37 Frequency of all responses given by incoming Level 1 students & BA Photography incoming Level 1 students to 'What were the best things about your previous course?' (Survey 2: September 2007, 2008 & 2009).

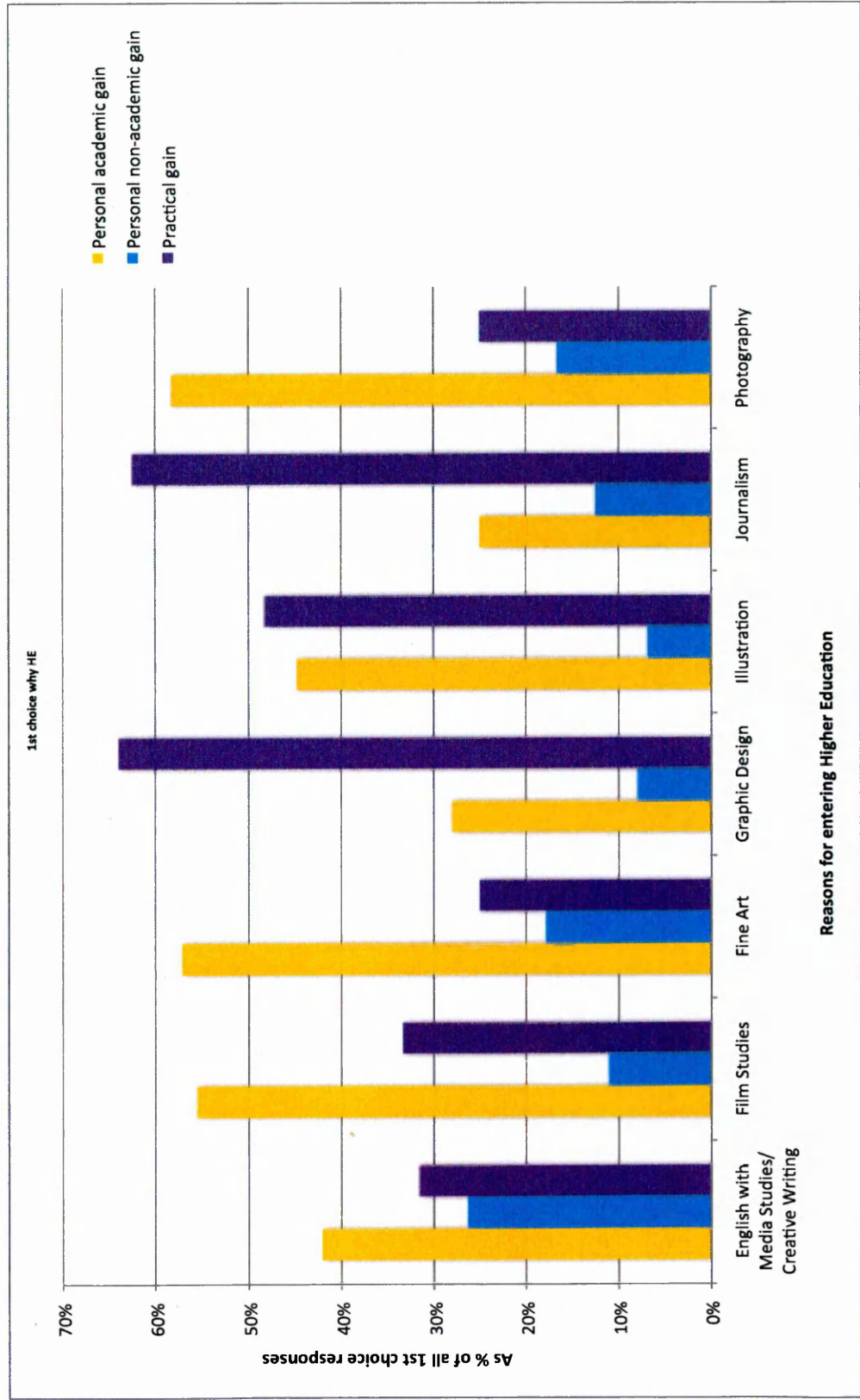
All courses: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 96% (2007)
 BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 77% (2007)
 BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 94% (2008)
 BA Photography: Incoming (2009 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 98% (2009)



Appendix P

Figure 38 Cross-section of courses, incoming Level 1 (2007 entry) students' reasons for entering HE (1st response given only)
(Survey 2: September 2007)

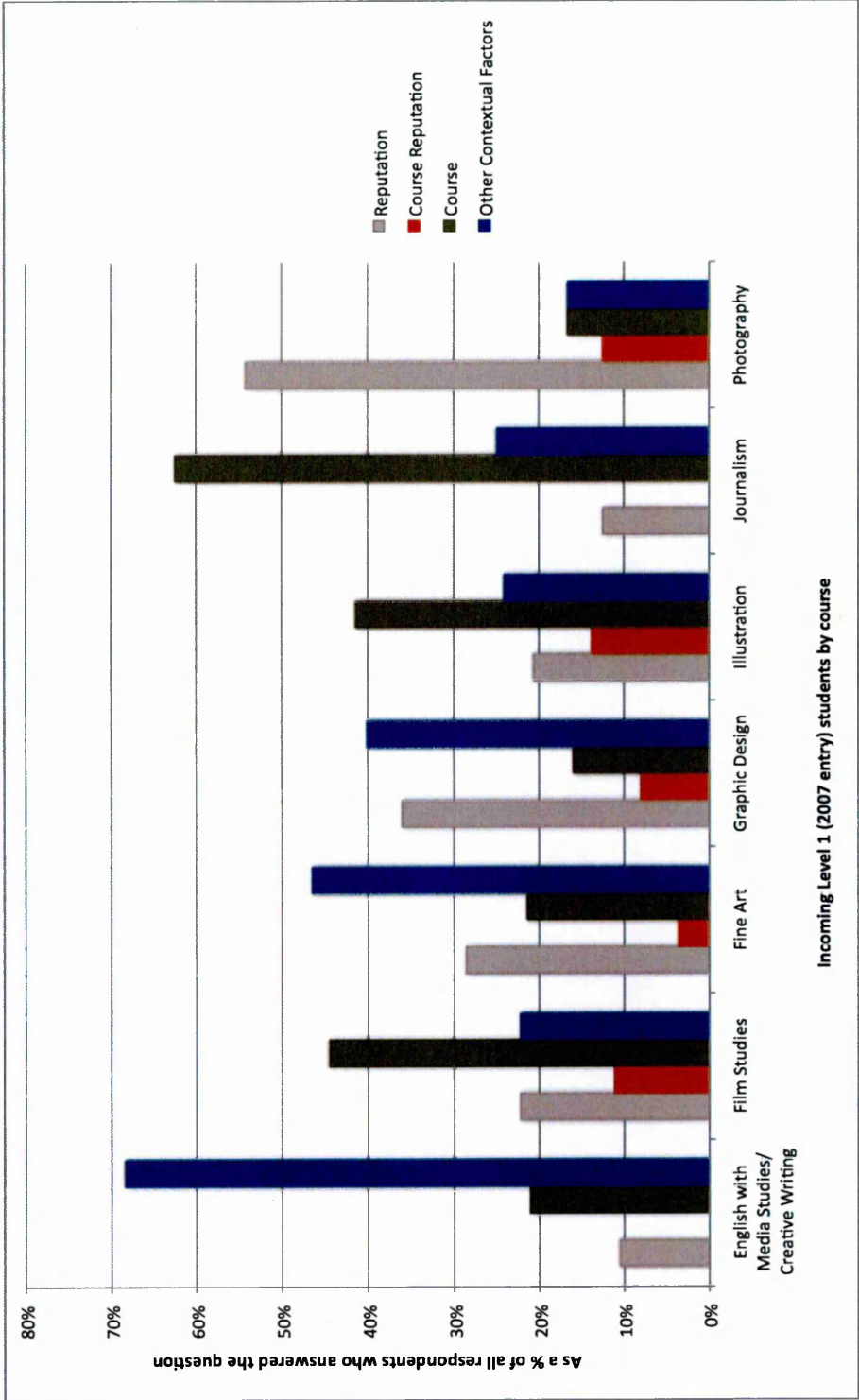
Response rate to the question for all courses: 100% with the exception of BA Photography that had a response rate of 80% to the question



Appendix P

Figure 39 Cross-section of courses, Incoming Level 1 (2007 entry) students' reasons for attending my institution (1st responses only) (Survey 2: September 2007)

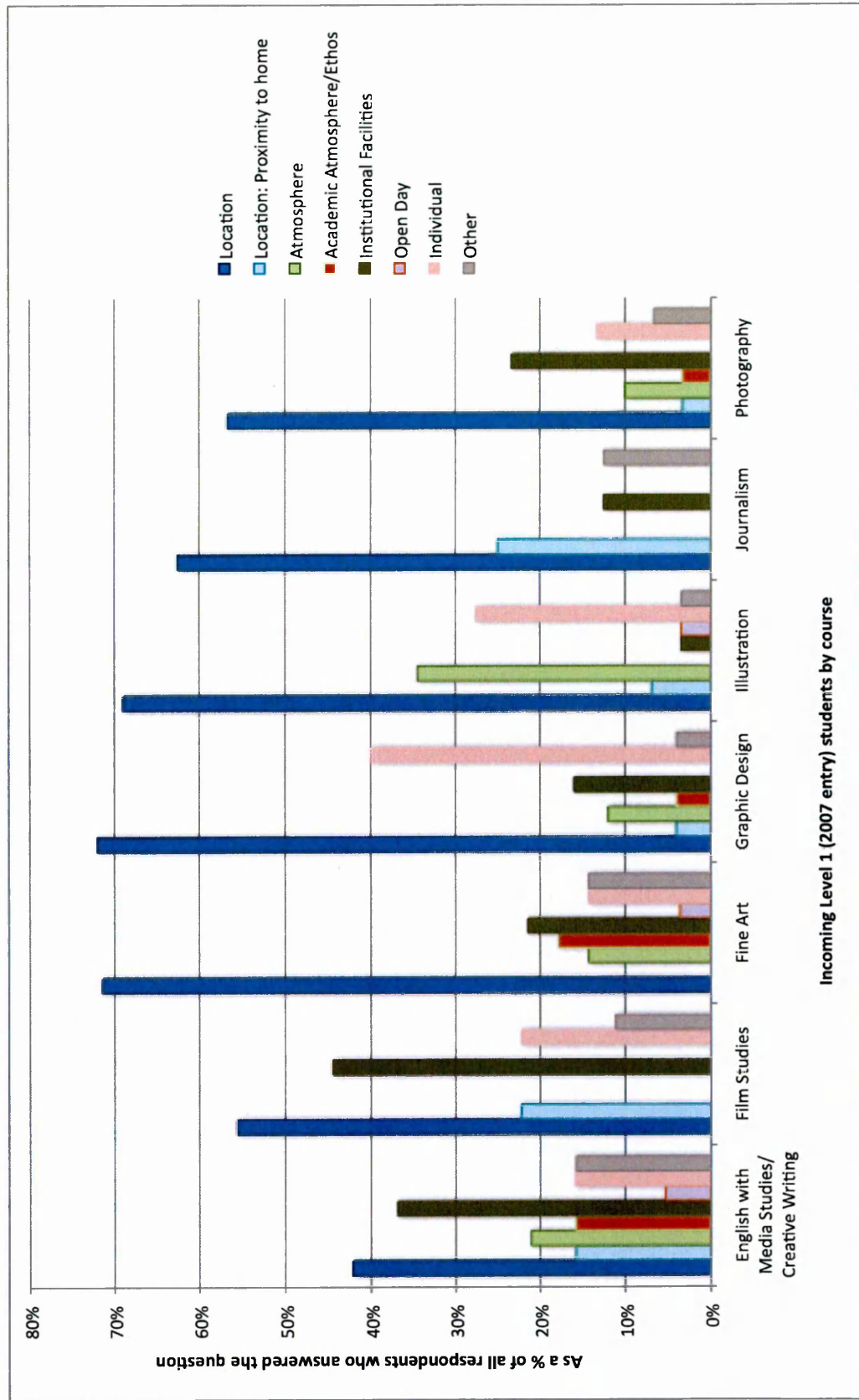
Response rate to the question for all courses: 100% with the exception that BA Photography had a response rate of 80% to the question



Appendix P

Figure 40 Breakdown of 'Other Contextual Factors' cited by a cross-section of courses summarising incoming Level 1 students (2007 entry) reasons for attending my institution as an aggregate of all responses given (Survey 2: September 2007)

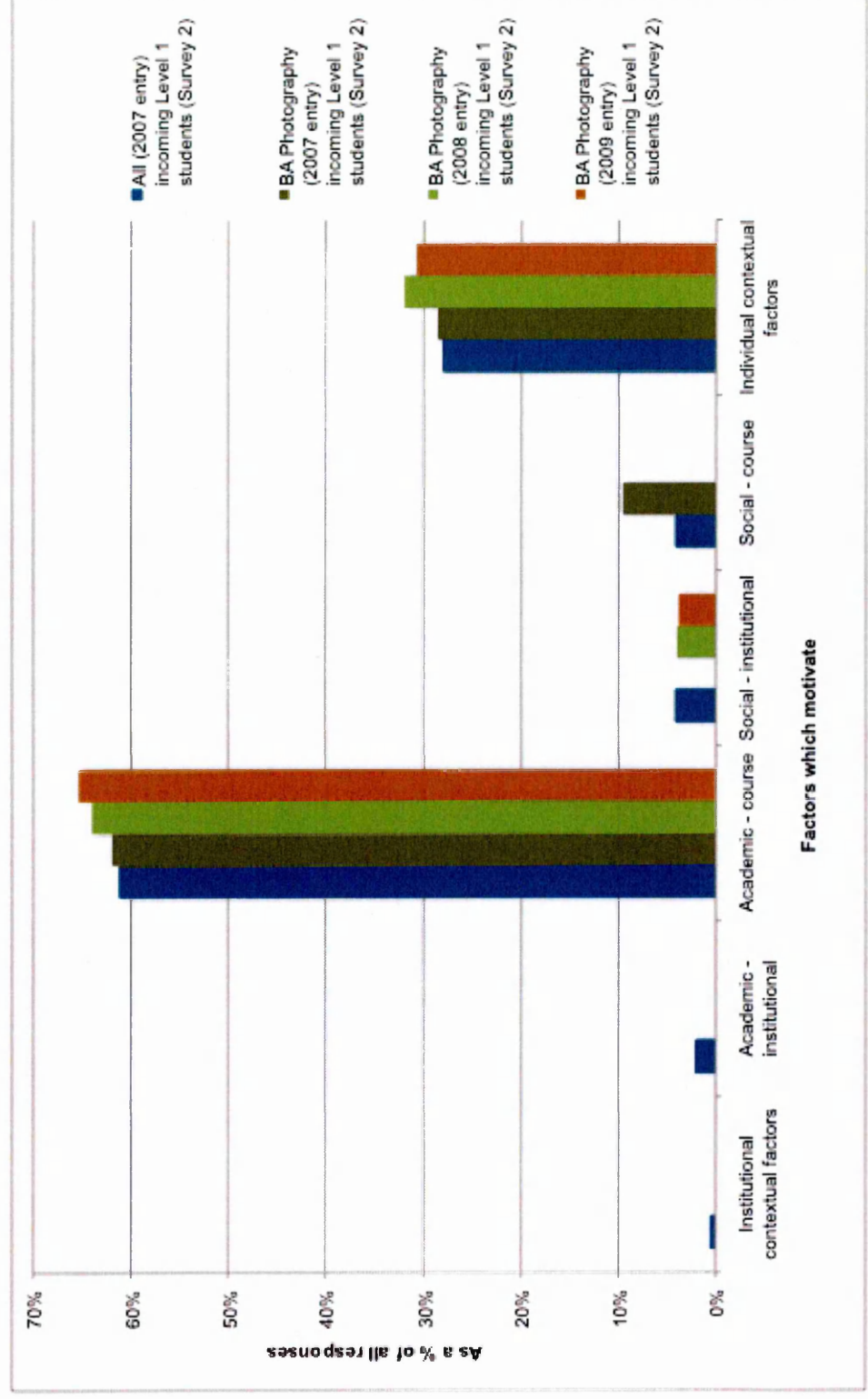
Response rate to the question for all courses: 100% with the exception that BA Photography had a response rate of 80% to the question



Appendix P

Figure 41 Incoming Level 1 students & BA Photography incoming Level 1 students response to the question “What keeps you going/helps you maintain your motivation in your studies?” (Survey 2: 2007, 2008 & 2009)

All courses: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 86% (2007)
 BA Photography: Incoming (2007 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 70% (2007)
 BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 69% (2008)
 BA Photography: Incoming (2009 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 59% (2009)



Appendix Q

Evaluation of a pre-entry online 'chat-room' for new students

Figure 42 **Percentage of incoming, Level 1 students (September 2008 & September 2009 entry) BA Photography students who used the pre-entry online forum, & of these responses, the percent who responded that they found it useful (Survey 2: 2008 & 2009)**

Appendix Q

Figure 42 Percentage of incoming, Level 1 students (September 2008 & September 2009 entry) BA Photography students who used the pre-entry online forum, & of these responses, the percent who responded that they found it useful (Survey 2: 2008 & 2009)

BA Photography: Incoming (2008 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 100% (2008)

BA Photography: Incoming (2009 entry) Level 1 student response rate to this question: 92% (2009)

